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THE BITTER FEUD.

BY

MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON.



"OH, SHE IS DEAD! SHE IS DEAD!" SHRIEKED FAY, AND STRAIGHTWAY RELAPSED INTO HYSTERIA.

The Bitter Feud; OR, THE FATEFUL LEGACY.

BY MRS. JENNIE DAVIS BURTON,
AUTHOR OF "ADRIA THE ADOPTED," "THE TERRIBLE TRUTH," "DOUBLY DIVORCED," ETC.

CHAPTER I. MADAME.

A DESOLATE wilderness of a place, closed in around by Pennsylvania hills, which mocked its title of Fairview Glen. The village was long and narrow, the heights precipitous, broken and dangerous. The hillsides were covered with thick growths of somber, scrubby pines, with silver birches, oaks, and chestnuts, mingling sparsely in the heavy foliage.

Fairview village straggled in irregular line, its squat houses clinging fast in notches and declines, with a couple of tolerably accurate streets lying in the level stretch which bordered the deep, rock-bound, noisy creek, that gurgled complainingly through unseen crevices, and twisted like a snake through the dark ravines.

At the top of the glen, a mile or more from Fairview, was a granite-built manse where dwelt Madame Durand, whose sterile yet withal profitable possessions extended for miles on every side.

A pedestrian was clambering up the footpath which led by a more direct route than the winding road to the manse. A little wiry man, well past middle age, with grizzled hair sleekly combed, and a cadaverous countenance, which would have worn a decidedly dyspeptic look but for the glimmer of cheery good-humor expressed in the bright blue eyes which time had in no wise dimmed. He had a quick, nervous motion which betrayed the working of a restless mind, and accompanied the soliloquy he was indulging in by gesticulating, and checking off the points he mentally decided with a lean forefinger on the palm of the opposite hand.

"One—two—three," he counted. "Yes, positively three times that Madame Durand has sent for me in hot haste within a week. First to make an extension of Winston's lease, as though my time were of no value that I should employ it in trotting up this mountain-side for merely that! Then, to have me go quietly over the books of that young agent she has taken to the manse of late, and right glad I am to be rid of the charge of rents and taxes she has saddled on him. No use of my trouble, either; the young fellow is open and honest as the day. Not a flaw in his accounts and the books perfect; couldn't keep them better myself. I only wish the other *protege*—the one she has planted in my office against my wish and will, I'll confess—had something like his method and application.

"Mighty queer woman is the madame! A bed of quicksand, a deceitful sea, a cat's claw in a velvet case, when she's smiling; a small tornado, a fire-spitting volcano, when her ire's roused. I'm the only man in the village that's not afraid of her, I believe, always excepting my young law-student, and he would face St. Michael himself. A reckless lad that, and not bound for much good, I doubt me."

The wiry little lawyer paused to take breath and to shake his head ominously, but continued his soliloquy when he pursued his walk again.

"And now what the madame may want is beyond my guess. Some fool's errand, I dare say. The woman will take no advice, so there's scarcely a hope she will attend to the one matter that, if I had my way, should be a nightmare to her till it is done. Does she expect to live as long as Methuselah, I wonder?"

He passed through a side gate into the grounds belonging immediately to the manse.

A couple of flats in the form of terraces, which occupied the space in front of the building, were crowded with flower-beds of fantastic shape, with white-pebbled walks twisting like shiny-scaled serpents between.

It was one of the madame's whims to dispense with right-angles; so beds and walks formed a complication of curves curious to witness. A stretch of turf lawn on one side was separated by a low, well-trimmed hedge from the sharp decline of the mountain-side; on the other, orchards of various fruits deepened into a grove of the native forest trees.

The house was built of solid granite blocks, with a round tower rising on the northern side. Two square facades, facing the west, were separated by a smaller square, like an unenclosed court. This was approached by a half-dozen granite steps, and was paved with alternate squares of black and gray. Three or four great entrance-doors opened upon a piazza which encircled this court.

Madame Durand had divested the whole front of a grim, formidable aspect by filling the open square with growing plants. Oleander trees in immense boxes, prickly cacti, and glossy-leaved orange trees, well protected from searching winds; geraniums and running vines

in huge porphyry vases; vivid mosses and feathery ferns springing from the crevices of two miniature pyramids composed of unique specimens of the native rocks.

With scarcely a glance about him, the lawyer walked briskly up to one of the entrance-doors, and plied the knocker on the heavy oaken panel.

He was ushered in by a dignified, white-haired servant-man, who boasted of having spent the greater part of his life in the service of the Durands. He was shown into an octagonal room, furnished with solid antique wood and brocatel, darkened and worn by the usage of half a century. Square casements, where the tiny panes had been replaced by double sheets of plate-glass, were partially obscured by painted shades. Pots of rose-geranium filled a recess, pervading the room with their fragrance.

The lawyer was standing still in the center of the room when the sharp ring of a cane in an uncarpeted side corridor made itself heard, and a door swung open to admit Madame Durand.

A grotesque little figure, straight and lithe, though the weight of seventy years rested upon it. The door clanged behind her, and the madame stood with her hands clasped over the top of her ebony stick, her face turned scrutinizingly toward her visitor.

A remarkable face it was, too. Oval and rounded as a girl's, with a skin rich in texture as the leaf of a calla lily, but yellowed and wrinkled; a mouth that was firm to obstinacy, with a satirical expression lurking in the corners that betrayed little of philanthropic views; and jet-black, twinkling eyes, piercing as a hawk's.

Madame's wrinkled little hands sparkled with brilliants, and long, glittering pendants drooped from her ears. Her dress was a purple brocade, cut after the fashion of a half-century ago; the square bodice was filled with lace, yellow as the madame's own mellowed complexion. A slender chain of gold and jet encircled her neck, suspending a cross composed of the same materials.

The lawyer stared at her stupidly, evidently unaccustomed to such magnificence. Madame laughed; hers had been a musical laugh once, years ago, but it was shrill and disjointed in its triumphant cadence now.

"A very good day to you, Mr. Thancroft," she cried, in a high-pitched, vivacious tone. "Good gracious, man, what has come over you? you are speechless as a mute and staring as an owl. Fortunate that I'm not easily disconcerted, now, isn't it?"

The lawyer bowed low, and muttered an apology as he placed her a chair.

"Ah, say nothing, say nothing," interrupted madame, graciously, waving him to a seat near her. "I see exactly how it is. You are surprised to see such a butterfly emerge from the chrysalis of my old black velvet and close cap. You didn't know I could grace the Durand jewels still with any sort of dignity. Truth to tell, I doubted it, too, and decked myself sparingly, lest I might appear like a death's head arrayed for the banquet. I am gratified; I am back in my old element again. I say to myself: 'Bien, madame! your old power has not yet gone from you.' Almost like the great Alexander, I sigh that there are no more fields to win, no more foes to conquer. First, I quelled those who opposed me; then I conquered myself; and now, is it not pitiful? I have no one to sympathize with me in my new taste of the old familiar grandeur."

She spread out her hands, with their load of glittering stones. The pride of the Durands was like a great spreading tree, and two particular branches, which madame delighted in, were her pride of her own well-preserved comeliness, and of the Durand jewels, which were noted for their magnificence.

The lawyer met her half-mocking glance with one of quiet research.

Madame's moods were so chameleon-like he puzzled often to know how much sincerity her words contained.

"Whose fault is it that you have not one closely allied, who would joy with you or sorrow with you—who would add pleasure to your happiness, and comfort you in grief?"

"My own, perhaps," returned madame, complacently. "You don't suppose that I would submit to that much interference from another quarter, Mr. Thancroft?"

"Madame," burst forth the lawyer, impetuously, "you have warned me to silence on this subject more than once, but I will speak now; I will follow out my own view of duty by urging you to do justice to your own kin, at risk of all the friendship and interest that are between us. Our own claims are quits! You are a good friend to me; I am a good ally to you—neither is hidden beyond individual inclination. Heaven knows, if I have any influence with you I have striven faithfully to throw it into the balance in behalf of the boy who comes of your blood, and who is a floating waif somewhere, on the cold charity of the world for all I know, or any one else but you. You, madame, are unjustly holding him out of his own; you admitted once that you have kept him in ignorance of his

own origin, his true sphere, his rightful inheritance. Have you no natural affection that your vindictiveness must reach beyond the grave to the innocent offspring, whose sole offense was, after all, a slight one?"

"Madame, let me implore you, do not disregard the duty which devolves upon you. Do justice to your son's son if you would escape the rackings of remorse when it is too late."

Twice madame had essayed to check his tumultuous flow of words, and now she raised her ebony stick, stamping it angrily upon the floor.

"Ah, presumption!" she cried, sibilantly. "Another word and I will have you turned away from my door. I will disgrace you; I will take from you my patronage; I will unmake you as I have made you. Oh, ingratitude! you—*you* dictate to me. No more—no more!"

She half-rose in her chair, gesticulating violently, and quivering with indignation.

"I can say nothing more, madame. What can I hope to gain by it if no impulse of your heart responds to my appeal?"

"Heart!" cried madame. "You speak of hearts! What do you expect me to care for hearts when I glory in having none? Bah! I suffered enough before I rid myself of the troublesome incumbrance. I have an organ answering to the demands of actual life and perfect health. I have a brain and a will not to be blunted by any pettifogger. I have a digestion, a very good digestion, and so keep in cheerful tone. But of heart, as you define it, I have none, thank Heaven!"

"I trust you deceive yourself, madame."

"What! would you have me racked by tortures, torn by grief, consumed by inward fires? The remembrance of what I endured sets me aflame, but having no heart, I have no pain, and dismiss it, so!"

She extended her hands, palms outward, and sunk back into her seat, suddenly calm.

"You should not provoke me to anger," she said. "I can't afford to quarrel with you, and you know it. There, there! I sent for you in the way of business."

"To make your will, madame?"

"My will!" shrieked Madame Durand, shivering and shaking her stick at him menacingly. "Do you want me to die, man? Ah, you would like to be appointed sole executor; you would like a mourning-ring, and a well-stocked farm, and a set of silver plate, as kind remembrances. My will! People always die after they make their wills."

"Sometimes they die before," suggested the lawyer, maliciously.

"What a pity!" retorted madame. "The honest lawyers lose their fees."

"A truce to quibbling," said Mr. Thancroft. "Come to your point, madame. Let us not waste time to no purpose."

"Truly, a man's way of covering a retreat," scoffed madame. "Cowards—traitors, all of them. I wonder you are not ashamed of your sex, Mr. Thancroft."

"Business, madame, business!"

"Very well, then," Madame metamorphosed in a moment. She caressed her jeweled hands, looking placidly before her.

"You wondered at seeing me without my somber attire. Do so no longer; I have determined to inaugurate a new state of affairs here at the manse. I shall turn another leaf in my book of life, Mr. Thancroft."

"I want more vitality in the house. What would you say to introducing a younger generation?"

He regarded her with inquiring interest, but silently inclining his head, awaited her further explanation.

"I have learned that there are two young girls of the Durand blood, coming of another distinct branch but distantly allied to me, both poor and obscure. I want them looked up and brought here to be provided for at my expense. Who knows but I may conclude to make one of them my heiress?"

"Madame!" ejaculated the lawyer, aghast.

"Hold your peace then, and let me alone to follow my own course. What I want of you is to find those girls and bring them here to me. Erne will give you my written instructions. Good-morning to you, Mr. Thancroft."

Madame Durand dismissed him abruptly with a peremptory wave of her jeweled hand.

And the lawyer, going slowly out through the little court, shook his head and muttered to himself in a very dissatisfied way.

CHAPTER II.

MADAME'S PROTEGES.

A YOUNG man lounged on the bank of the noisy little creek, with fishing-tackle lying idle beside him. Inert and listless as he seemed, with half-closed eyes and lazy attitude, he did not look like a vapid dreamer.

His features were straight and regular, with the low, broad brow and the short curving upper lip seldom seen except in statuary. His collar was thrown open, exposing his neck like a white, strong column. His hair was brown, glistened with bronze, and lay in short waves about a head which, in its perfect classic cut-

lines, might have served as a model of some Greek god.

Nature is neither stint nor mercenary in her good gifts; she does not bestow lavishly on any one class or station. Judged by his personal endowments this young man, handsome as Apollo Belvidere, might have been taken for a prince of the blood; yet he was only Lucian Ware, Mr. Thancroft's law student.

He half turned his head as a step came down the rocky pathway and was deadened on the thick turf of the bank where he lay, but seeing the new-comer made no further change of his position.

"You, Valere?" he said with a yawn. "I thought it might be old Thancroft's shadow—North, you know. Such a spooney, so devoted to the interests of the office as he has it. Unnecessarily honest and deucedly vexatious to toe the mark after his style, I say. I gave him the slip to-day, after the boss was off, and got here for a little quiet enjoyment."

"Which I have interrupted, I suppose. Did you hear me in your dreams, or weren't you asleep?"

"I was thinking how blank North will look when he finds his old musty documents uncopied. Madame deserves my grateful thanks no doubt, but I wish she had found me a more agreeable berth than Thancroft's snuggery."

"It was your own choice, if I remember."

"Hobson's choice, you mean. There was no alternative presented."

"The professions were all open to you."

"One is good as another," returned Ware. "I hate drudgery, and the professions are made of it. Look at the boss, for instance; he is nothing more than an animated machine to carry out the whims of other people. What pleasure does he find in such a narrow existence, think you?"

"The consciousness of being of use to his fellow-man, perhaps."

"Stuff! We are beyond the age of Quixotic enterprises, my dear fellow, and just as far ahead of such philanthropic actuations as you would ascribe. Of course Thancroft don't realize his own littleness, but a man with a soul above trifles could never content himself while so prescribed."

"Meaning the illustration to apply to yourself."

"Exactly. Think of me writing out cases or dancing attendance to the madame's will. Faugh!"

"Is not that an unfortunate view to take of it? How do you reconcile the application of your life and labor with such discontent?"

"I don't pretend to," returned Ware.

The other, a young man of apparently about Ware's own age, which scarcely exceeded two-and-twenty, leaned against the trunk of a neighboring birch tree, gazing thoughtfully down into the stream below. He was taller, heavier and darker than his handsome companion, but his countenance was prepossessing, and his appearance that of a well-bred gentleman. His name was Erne Valere, and he was the youthful agent whom Madame Durand had latterly employed to the relief of Mr. Thancroft, who had hitherto been burdened by the sole charge of all the business. The young man's office was onerous without accruing much of honor; he kept the accounts of a half-dozen farms scattered at some distance further up the mountain; of the cattle and produce each yielded, for they were sterile lands fit for little except pasturage. Madame had grown rich from them, however, so steady had been the success of her speculations in stock raising.

These two young men were her proteges! Madame was eccentric even in her charities, and while it was supposed that she had some deeper reason than mere beneficence in seeing them educated and provided for, her real motive—if she had a concealed one—had not been unveiled from obscurity.

Erne Valere had apartments at the manse since his entrance upon his new duties, and received his instructions generally from madame herself. But, apart from these business interviews, he received neither courtesy nor observation from madame except on stated occasions, when the two young men were invited together to dine with their patroness. Each had received the customary notification upon the morning of the day, some two weeks subsequent to the interview chronicled between the madame and her lawyer.

Lucian Ware lay upon the turf bank plucking idly at the blades of grass, but as his companion displayed no inclination to break the silence which had fallen between them, he addressed him again petulantly.

"Are you taking your turn at dreaming now, Valere? A pretty one to preach morality of action—*you!*"

"I have not yet done so, but I would assuredly if I thought my words would have effect."

"Spare yourself; I have been following the bent of your mind. It is a very transparent mask that you wear."

"You are acute at reading human nature."

"I don't find much good in it then to reward me for the study; though if I did I would scarcely follow it. I detest your men of earnest minds if they have no devilry in them."

Ware was cynical, to an extent painful in one so young. Selfishness and egotism were his leading characteristics, but were toned not unpleasantly to the general sight by a fastidiousness of taste which covered the glaring conspicuity of his faults.

"I wish you were not so skeptical, Lucian," said Erne, concernedly. "You rob your life of much that would be pleasant in it but for that distrust of mankind—yourself inclusive—you so persistently cling to."

"You mistake," interrupted Ware. "I do not distrust myself. I have the utmost confidence in my own capacity for either good or evil. I wonder if it is a perversion of nature that I incline to the latter. I think I could take a kind of supreme satisfaction in knowing myself bad to the very core, not one of your coarse blood-thirsty ruffians, but a gentlemanly scoundrel who could smile and smile and be a villain still." There, don't look so shocked, Valere; I haven't compassed my ambition yet, whatever I may do in time."

"You speak recklessly, Lucian. Life is too full of glorious possibilities for such a satire on it as you picture, and should not be viewed in the way you see it. The indulgence of these vague dreams is a profitless way of spending idle time."

"Stolen time, my good Erne; stolen to indulge this very profitless amusement. Doubtless you think I am wasting the precious dust of time to my own irremediable loss, but you should remember that striking instances of genius have developed from unexpected sources. I will make a bold stroke some day which shall leave me lord of the caste recognized in even our republican land."

"Take care, my lord, that your castle does not tumble about your ears, provided anything so unsubstantial as air can be demolished."

"I might have known you would have no sympathy with my aspirations."

"All worthy aspirations claim my sympathy."

"Fair in my sight, foul in yours, perhaps. To change the subject, you have been bidden to the feast to-night, I suppose."

"Yes; madame has extended the customary invitation."

"Not quite, for this is an extra occasion. Have you never learned the art of putting two and two together?"

"I fail to comprehend."

"Have you been made acquainted with madame's latest whim? She is not content with sheltering you and I beneath her motherly wing, but has hunted up a couple of poverty-stricken female relatives to share our favor. Don't I hope they may be gushing girls of the period whose boisterous proclivities shall make the madame rue her assumed responsibility? Old Thancroft was in high dudgeon, and betrayed more of the matter than he was authorized to do, I imagine."

"Then do not repeat the information you chanced to gain, Lucian. You should respect the wishes of our patroness, even though her commands do not weigh upon you."

"You are too conscientious by half, Erne. There is nothing secret in what I have heard—nothing but you might have known had you unbent from your dignity far enough to have questioned the servants at the manse. There, don't look so thunderous, brave champion of morality! No one would suspect you of yielding to such inexcusable curiosity. In your place, I should have sought the madame, and begged to be admitted to her confidence; but then, I am not troubled with your ridiculous scruples."

"These young ladies madame has unearthed come from some far-away branch of the Durands, yet it is received as a fact already settled, that she intends leaving her wealth to one of them, provided always that she does not veer off on some other tack before deciding which. And that brings me back to my starting-point. Our invitation to dinner to-day will include a presentation to the new acquisitions."

"If you are correct, there will be a marked distinction between Madame Durand's prospective heiress and Lucian Ware, the penniless law student, or Erne Valere, madame's salaried agent."

"Yes; but only one of the young ladies is to become the heiress. Madame has repeatedly declared that the property shall not be separated. They are both equally allied to her, and she will feel bound to provide in some manner for the least fortunate of the two. What easier than to marry her to one of the dependent young men and pension the pair, thus comfortably ridding herself of them? Madame is a deep one in her way, though she isn't apt to consider all the consequences."

"Well, madame has a right to engineer her own pleasure," remarked Erne. "I must be moving, for I am not quite through for the day."

"Do as I do—slip the traces."

Valere shook his head smilingly.

"That is not my way of doing business, Lucian. Better reconsider and go back in time to redeem yourself in Mr. Thancroft's eyes."

"I've a notion to astonish North for this one time, not from any ideas of duty, but because I'll have your company on the way."

Valere waited while the other gathered up his unused fishing rod, and adjusted his collar with a hasty twitch.

Ware was not lacking in agility and nimbleness of motion when once roused from his listless attitude. He sprang lightly up the rocky path, and kept easy pace with his companion's quick steps when they reached the winding road.

"If it were not for the trouble, I would be inclined to circumvent madame at her own game," he said carelessly, but with a keen side-glance at the other.

"In what manner, pray?"

"By marrying the heiress. Our patroness has not taken that possibility into consideration."

"And you, Lucian, had better drop the contemplation, at least until you have something more than idle surmise to work upon."

They walked on for a little space in utter silence, and then the roll of an approaching carriage drew their attention. It passed them presently, an open phaeton containing two female figures in traveling wraps and close veils, and Mr. Thancroft on the seat with the coachman.

Lucian Ware took off his hat with a flourish, and executed a low bow of mock obeisance after the receding vehicle.

"Welcome to the heiress of all Fairview. May she be subtle enough to propitiate the madame, and possess discrimination to appreciate the worth of your humble servant."

CHAPTER III.

MADAME'S NEW CHARGES.

THE phaeton paused before the outer gates, for madame would have no carriageway leading through the grounds to the entrance.

The little lawyer clambered down and in his stiff, old-fashioned way, assisted the two girls to alight. They glanced about them, gaining their first impression of their new home, which Mr. Thancroft's customary reticence had not prompted him to describe.

They were ushered together into madame's presence, in the same octagonal room where we have previously seen her.

Madame wore the purple brocade, the time-dimmed lace, which had been resurrected from winding shrouds of yellowed linen and the funereal depths of cedar chests; the gold and the brilliants which had been brought to light for the first time in years in honor of madame's newest whim.

She was seated in an arm-chair, which for ungainliness and discomfort was a fair type of the furniture in vogue three generations back. The faded brocade, and quaint carving of its design, were concealed by a cloth of striped purple and gold finished at the edges by a fringe of gold bullion, which had been thrown completely over it. The gorgeousness of effect was heightened by the immense proportions of the chair, rendering a footstool indispensable. Altogether, it would require no extravagant flight of fancy to imagine madame a queen enthroned.

She rose as they entered, descending nimbly from her elevated station, and clasping her wrinkled, jeweled hands over the top of her ebony stick, she stood silently regarding them.

The erect little figure in its old-style dress, with head turned to one side, and bright black eyes peering at them with a glance bird-like in its unwavering intensity, presented a picture far as possible from the expectations of the two young girls. In the mental speculations they had indulged regarding the manse and its mistress, each had unconsciously imagined a stately, dignified dame, a little stern in demeanor and inclined to appear graciously condescending to the new dependants.

The disparity between the vision and the reality disconcerted them for a moment.

"Young ladies—well, young ladies!" spoke the madame's sharp, quick tones. "Where did you take your lessons in civility and etiquette? What do you take me to be—a gnome, or a dragoness, or a creature of ordinary flesh and blood? Mr. Thancroft, in my day the ceremony of introduction was not considered dispensable between parties for the first time met."

Mr. Thancroft apologized, and presented the young ladies in due form as Fay St. Orme and Mirabel Durand.

"Fay? Bah! A babyfied name, but it matches your face," said madame, to the former. "And you"—turning to the other girl—"you are a Durand. You should be proud as Lucifer, passionate, inconsiderate, foolhardy and daring, to do justice to your descent. There! I see—I see! You carry evidence of your extraction in your face. The Durand pride is flaming there now, and you bear yourself haughtily as though you never toiled fourteen hours in the day as nursery-governess to a pork-merchant's children. It wasn't pleasant, was it, for you, gently born and gingerly reared, though knowing enough of poverty always, to earn your meager bit and sup by suppressing your own inclinations to suit their vulgar character?"

"It was intolerable, madame," replied the girl, briefly.

"Hal ha!" laughed madame, as though infinitely amused. "And you hoped to better yourself by throwing up the situation and going as subordinate teacher into a day school. Your pride rebelled there again when the principal made love to you, though receiving no more encouragement than a disdainful princess would accord to a presuming subject. Unhappily there was a fussy Miss Jones who coveted both your truly enviable position in the school and the attentions of the principal. She succeeded in supplanting you."

"I should have resigned at the end of the term had she not done so. I was bound in all honor to stay so long."

"Honor?" cried Madame Durand, gibingly. "Oh, exacting Honor! what crosses it lays upon us! And the Durands are always honorable!"

"Madame!" interrupted Mirabel Durand, with an angry sparkle in her eyes.

"No imputations against your own motives, young lady; but my seventy years may comprise truer knowledge of these Durands than your single score. You left the school. You fell back upon that general resource—that miserable slavery which educated women fly to when left to their own efforts. You gave music lessons, trudging your rounds as regularly and almost as often as the postman himself."

"But persecution had not tired of you yet. You won another admirer, a married man this time, and one as much worse than your pedagogue as the venomous centipede is worse than the repulsive but harmless worm. You fled away from him, fearing the breath of slander which might sully a character pure as spotless snow."

"Madame!" interrupted the girl again, with burning cheeks and flashing eyes. "It is my misfortune to be poor. If poverty has subjected me to such humiliating trials, at least it has never degraded me. It was at your bidding, and not of my seeking, that I am here. I will not endure the insult of the taunts you heap upon me for all the favor you can show, Madame Durand."

"Yet my favor may be well worth keeping," said madame dryly. "I like you, Mirabel Durand, and I admire the spirit you have displayed. There are plenty that would go far to win that much appreciation from me."

Mirabel Durand shot a half-defiant glance at the imperious old woman, but she had wheeled about to face the other young girl, who, with the lawyer, had been a silent witness of the scene.

"You, Fay St. Orme—a ridiculous name—you come of the blood with as straight a lineage as she. Let me see; your father was some cavalry officer."

"Colonel St. Orme."

"By brevet; I remember. Unfortunate that he should have died of a vulgar malaria instead of meeting death gloriously on the battle-field. There, I've no reminiscences regarding you. What have you done all your life?"

"I remained at school until a year ago. Since that, I have been with mamma at uncle St. Orme's."

"Humph," said madame, peering at her in her odd, bird-like fashion. "You have all the modern accomplishments, I suppose. You can dance and play, paint, draw, make feather flowers, and work Chinese puzzles in silk floss? That about comprises a fashionable education, doesn't it?"

Fay, scarcely knowing how to take the madame, admitted that she knew something of these accomplishments.

"And you can flirt, too—dance on men's hearts, which doesn't hurt them much, for hearts, nowadays, have plenty of elastic qualities. You're not hard to read, Miss Fay St. Orme. You are shallow and selfish; good-natured, I hope; vain, I know. They are not cardinal sins, and I've a word of warning for you. I'll not have you flirting here at the manse. I'll not be troubled having the young jackdaws of the neighborhood flocking here, and I'll see if those wonderful attainments of yours can be put to any account."

"Mr. Thancroft, you'll stay to dinner to oblige me. You, young ladies, can retire for a time. We dine precisely at six, and I have a decided aversion to be kept waiting. Milly, Milly Ross—here!"

Madame rapped sharply on the black marble hearth with her ebony stick. The door opened almost instantly, and a quaint figure appeared on the threshold. So small, that at the first glance it seemed the figure of a child; the short, scant skirt exposing a pair of small prim feet made the stature appear less than it really was. The face was older, belonging to twenty years or more, and was oddly striking in its quiet contour. The skin was transparent and colorless, the lips thin and pale, the eyes of that light-blue which reminds one of the thinnest of well-skimmed milk, the hair of a neutral tint, very fine, and arranged in the smoothest of tiny close braids, matched by the knot of gray ribbon with which they were tied.

"Show the young ladies to their rooms, Milly, and wait upon them, if they require it."

Madame waved them away, and turned her attention to Mr. Thancroft. She perfectly understood the stiff constraint he had imposed upon himself, but having carried her point, she was sublimely indifferent to the evident dissatisfaction of her friend and adviser.

"Now, how go your own affairs, Mr. Thancroft? How does our young student progress, and will his acumen serve to grace the profession under your admirable teaching and example?"

"The young man is naturally quick enough, but I doubt if he will ever make a good lawyer. He is too indolent to accomplish any thing, with too little application to carry him straight through the simplest tasks. We passed him with a fishing-rod in his hands just beyond the village, and I'm sure North has need of his assistance in the office. I wouldn't undertake such a charge except to favor you, madame."

Madame laughed.

"Young and heedless, he will come out of it," said she, lightly. "Think of the charge I have undertaken—two flighty young creatures instead of one!"

"Hope you may get the benefit of them too," grumbled the lawyer, to himself.

"What's that you say?" queried madame, sharply.

"I hope they may appreciate your beneficent intentions, madame!"

"Don't attempt a compliment, Mr. Thancroft. It only comes from your lips, for you know, as well as I, that there's no beneficence about it. It is simple my pleasure to take them into charge without any care for them or their welfare. Now, honestly, what particular good is there in gratifying myself?"

"None whatever, madame," retorted the lawyer, brusquely, "so long as you forget duty in doing it."

"How accommodating you are, and how you amuse me, my good friend," cried madame, briskly. "What a simplicity of candor, what a disregard of personal interest! Such open independence is refreshing in our day, and for one of your profession. Would it make any difference, I wonder, if I withdraw my business because of your plain speaking?"

"On my soul, I wish you would," said the lawyer, hotly. "It's not so easy, madame, playing cat's-paw to a perverse woman."

"Does the pay for it burn your fingers, honest man?" queried madame, provokingly. "Fairview would thrive you without the Durand charges, would it not? There, you're sorry, I see. Don't apologize. You would not have been so rash, but you know I do not resent your officiousness."

"Be conciliated, Mr. Thancroft. I have ordered stuffed goose for dinner in consultation of your taste."

Stuffed goose was the lawyer's weakness, and he began to unbend in anticipation of the savory dish.

The two girls, following their guide passed through a narrow corridor into a circular hall situated as nearly as they could judge in the center of the mansion. A spiral staircase wound through the entire height to the roof, widening on each floor of the ascent, illuminated only by a skylight at the top. The steps were broad, and they ascended only to the first landing, but Fay St. Orme looked back into the vault-like shadows lying beneath with a visible shudder.

"Ugh, what a horrid old place!" she exclaimed. "I shall expect nothing better than to break my neck in that dark pit one of these days. What could the builder have meant by setting such a man-trap, I wonder? Isn't there any other way of going up and down, you—Milly? That's what madame called you, I think."

"There's the servants' stairway at the back," answered Milly, slowly. "I don't think madame would like you to use that."

"I don't think I should like it myself," said Fay, with a toss of her head.

"You will soon grow accustomed to this one, Miss St. Orme," said Mirabel Durand. "It is the strangeness of it impresses you now; there can be no actual danger with these solid balustrades."

"This way, if you please," said Milly Ross, leading on again.

She threw open the door of a moderate-sized room, having an outlook toward the orchards and deepening wood which skirted the south side of the narrow lawn.

"This is your sitting-room, meant for the use of both," she explained, and throwing open a second door—"this one is the dressing-room; the bedchambers are separate, but both open into this. The one to the right for Miss Durand, the other for Miss St. Orme."

The bedrooms were tiny apartments, almost filled by huge old-fashioned bedsteads, chair and washstand. Fay glanced discontentedly at the great four-posters with canopies of dingy damask, and only a square of drugget covering the center of the floor.

"I had a French bed at uncle St. Orme's," she said, poutingly, "with cashmere counterpanes

and real lace-ruffled pillows. Our dormitory at school was better furnished than these rooms."

"Madame has left the rooms exactly as they were when she first married," said Ross. "Only some of them were newly-furnished then, I believe. Madame is very fond of the old things."

"I don't admire her taste then," declared Fay. "If I were mistress here I'd make a bonfire of the old rubbish."

"Better not tell the madame that," remarked Milly, dryly.

"I don't propose spoiling my chance of figuring in madame's will, if that is what you mean. But the place is detestable for all that."

"It is quaint and old-styled to a degree," said Mirabel. "I like the solid masonry and the queer corners."

"It's like one of the haunted houses one finds in old story-books. I'm just unromantic enough to prefer modern elegance to remote antiquities. I hope madame is amenable to sweet persuasion, there's such lots of things I'll want to make life endurable here."

"I wonder that you should come at all when it was so much nicer at your uncle's," said Milly Ross, pertly.

"I wouldn't throw away the chance of one day becoming the Durand heiress," said Fay, with an air of charming *naivete*. "That is, if Miss Durand don't forestall me in the madame's favor. You see, I happen to know that she means to pitch upon one of us two. It's not time to dress yet, is it?"

"Not yet. I'll come back in half an hour to unpack for you."

So saying, Milly Ross led the way back to the sitting-room, and left the girls there together.

It was furnished in the same solid, dingy style which marked every portion of the manse. There were great round-backed chairs of heavy oak, grooved and beveled. There was a square table with a squat center-standard and sprawling claw feet. The carpet was green, faded almost to a yellow tint, and there were green blinds with a border of gaudy, painted flowers, at the windows. A high mantle had the space beneath filled with fragrant spruce-pine boughs. Heavy carved brackets were placed here and there against the walls. One held a curious marble vase with a growing, fine-leaved vine drooping its tangled tendrils over the edge.

"Madame must possess a refined taste," said Mirabel. "Nothing indicates it more truly than a passion for beautiful flowers."

Fay shrugged her graceful shoulders.

"I don't care a whit for madame's flowers," said she, "but I know that her jewels are magnificent. Those brilliants—how they sparkled on her shriveled hands. How would I look in the family diamonds, I wonder?"

"Very pretty, I think," said her companion, coldly. Miss Durand had not taken particularly to this fair connection whom she met for the first time upon that day when their routes had joined on their journey to the manse.

"Pretty?" echoed Fay. "I would be dazzling, bewildering! You see, I am perfectly well aware of my own beauty, Miss Durand, and because you are a beauty too it need not make us bad friends. I wish you'd sit in that stiff chair and let me take the stool at your feet. I want to get acquainted with you."

Mirabel seated herself while Fay's tongue rattled on unceasingly.

"We are both beauties, but there's no reason why we should be rivals on that account. We are not in the least alike. You are on the stately, grand order, and are perfect as a brunette can be. I can imagine how those great black eyes of yours can flash out scorn, and defiance, or melt with tenderness. The art of coquetry ought to come natural to you, *ma chérie*."

"I have had little opportunity to cultivate it were I so inclined," said Mirabel, amused at her companion's assurance of speech.

"I should think so, if madame got your history correct. Why, in your place I should have flirted desperately with those importunate lovers."

"You will need to be reminded of madame's warning, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I can be circumspect, too. But you've made me forget my thread of discourse. I was saying that you were dark and queenly, and all that, while I'm fair and *petite*, and look innocent enough to be free of all guile. I'm so transparent that I'm telling you this because I know that you would find me out all the same. Now I want you to be very gentle with me, Mirabel Durand; I never want you to be cross or haughty with me, as I know it is in your nature to be. I always go into hysterics when people are unkind to me."

Mirabel laughed.

"I suspect you of being a little hypocrite," said she. "But I have a horror of hysteria, and will try to avoid afflicting you."

"You dear creature!" cried Fay, gushingly; but just there the conference was broken by the entrance of Milly Ross, ready to assist them in unpacking.

CHAPTER IV.

A DURAND PORTRAIT.

MADAME's ebony stick tapped across the paved court, and her high-heeled boots clicked

an accompanying sound. She stooped over where heliotrope tangled with cypress-vine, and plucked a sprig of the fragrant purple bloom.

Love of flowers was madame's grand passion, and she placed the spray of heliotrope tenderly in the lace of her bodice.

"Cypress I'll have none of," she said, passing her wrinkled hands over the tangled mass of tendrils. "Cypress is the type of death, and I shudder at the thought of death. Bah! I know well that all superstition is folly; it is silly this fancy of mine that the shadow of the dark valley menaces me.

"It was that meddlesome Thancroft put the notion in my brain through so persistent urging on the subject of my will. What can it be to him—is it not more vital to me, I wonder? But there's plenty of time for that—plenty of time.

"My lawyer friend grows troublesome when he becomes importunate; he is insolent when he openly reproaches me for what he calls neglect of duty, forgetfulness of natural ties. It is convenient, this utter absence of heart-feeling; it is well that I tore wounded affection out when it was bleeding from its fresh hurt. Some people petrify their hearts and carry a stone instead, but not Madame Durand, oh, no!

"I turn my attention to my digestion; I get rid of my bile, and am happy. Melancholy, morbidness, unhappiness, all a disease; I wonder that people don't discover the philosophy of healthy existence and be done with distressing passions.

"That Thancroft, now! What right has he to let his conscience trouble him for other people's faults? The idea of a lawyer having a conscience is ridiculous, and his application of it still more so. And yet he does not anger me as another would by his unwarranted interference. I wonder what he would say if he knew that the new whim he is so indignant over chances to be my way of effecting the justice he is so urgent to enforce upon me?"

Madame chuckled softly, and went her way up the piazza steps.

A glass door from the drawing-room opened upon the piazza, but madame saw fit to take a roundabout way through a little anteroom at the side. She came in so softly, too, despite the high heels and the stick that could make such a clatter at times, that Milly Ross, in the act of rescuing some small article from the stained and polished oaken floor, looked up, with a visible start.

"Nervous, Milly?" asked madame, in her quick, domineering way. "Take care; take valerian. I'm opposed to nerves; there's no sense in being troubled with them, and I'll not have people with weak nerves about me. What's that?"

"Only a glove that was dropped; it belong to one of the young gentlemen, I think."

"Humph, humph! Primrose kid, with the scent of violets. Lucian Ware's, of course. Problem: how many pairs of the same sort can he sport, on an allowance of a hundred a year and the trifle over he may earn at clerk's copying?—and he's not partial to that either, according to Mr. Thancroft's account. "What brand, Milly—Alexandre?"

"Louvre, madame."

"Good taste, but expensive."

Madame chuckled and raised her stick, as though she would have twirled the primrose kid upon its end, but, changing her mind, lowered it again.

"The young ladies, Milly—have they come down?"

"They are dressed, and waiting for your summons."

"Is Erne here?"

"Yes, madame."

"Then call down Miss Durand and Miss St. Orme."

Madame went briskly on into the room where the gentlemen were waiting. Milly Ross fumbled the glove she still held, and glanced doubtfully after her odd old mistress.

"Such a turn as she gave me coming sudden like that," she whispered. "I'm all a-tremble from it. Seemed as though her eyes saw straight through me, and the glove, too; I certainly thought she knew."

Milly's thin fingers groping in the recesses of the glove drew out a slip of rustling white paper, with a few words scrawled upon it. It seemed that the glove had been dropped with a purpose which this pale maid of madame's fully understood.

She went slowly back to the circular hall and up the winding stair to announce madame's desire to the two young girls.

Mirabel stood by the sitting-room window, watching the shadows as they stole darkly between the rows of the orchards. Fay twisted her ringlets and admired herself before the short, wide mirror inclined above the mantle-piece.

"I began to despair of madame's ever wanting us," she said, with a half-pout, "and I never look so well when I'm kept waiting in toilette. How do I appear, Ross? I've been waiting for a compliment from Miss Durand for half an hour, and I know I merit one, for I made it a study to look my sweetest. Now, tell me, did

you ever see any one half so pretty in this horrible wilderness?"

"We have some that claim to be beauties even here, miss," returned Ross. "None prettier than you, though, I'm bound to say."

"Oh, then we're not quite shut away from all the world? I'm glad to know that. Now, Miss Durand, it's your turn to tell what you think of me!"

Mirabel looked at her with a grave, critical face, but with an amused gleam in her great dusky eyes.

"It doesn't always answer to be candid," she said, with an air of half-doubt.

"But I want you to be. I love to have people admire me."

"That is just it, Miss St. Orme. I can't truthfully declare that I admire you to any positive degree. I have a very discriminating taste, and you are by no means perfect according to my judgment. At first glance you appear to be a very pretty little boy, but an attempt to analyze your style brings out numberless defects.

"In the first place, your hair is too yellow, and has too many kinks and crinkles in it to please my taste."

"Golden—everybody says it is the true golden shade," interrupted Fay. "And it curls beautifully."

"You have a very tolerable figure to be so tiny," Mirabel went on, composedly. "Your features are scarcely regular, your nose is actually a little *retroussée*, your mouth is a trifle too small, and it's so crooked—"

"Crooked! It's a perfect curve," cried Fay, indignantly.

"Then your complexion is so vividly red and white. You are decidedly plump; you have creases in your shoulders, and your eyes are green where they should have been gray."

"Beryl, Miss Durand; and a very unusual shade, I assure you. I should say that you are ill-natured and envious, but I see you are only trying to quiz me by finding fault. Think of having my dimples called creases, or to slur over the 'lily and rose' of my complexion as you have done! I'm quite sure none of my admirers would recognize me by your description. Now, I'm going to return good for evil, Miss Durand. You are splendid—superb! You do well to affect entire simplicity of dress, for it seems to enhance your natural attractions. I believe that shabby black silk would look absolutely dowdyish on any one else, but you couldn't be anything but queenly if you tried. Still I *should* have thought you would wear something better, considering that it is our first appearance, and Ross hinted that there are to be gentlemen, too."

"It is my best," said Mirabel, smiling at the little malice of the transparent artifice.

"You don't say! Why, I have any number as good as this one. You see, uncle St. Orme was very particular that I should be well-dressed, and when I wanted anything new I had only to spill wine or get a grease-spot on my latest. I was careful, too, that the soiled spot shouldn't interfere with making over, so I have a plentiful wardrobe. You see what a little good management does."

Mirabel laughed.

"I thought you were a little hypocrite, and now I know it," said she.

"You are so horridly outspoken," pouted Fay; "but then I suppose you know it becomes you. Now I can say disagreeable things, but I have to make believe I don't mean them when I want to be charming."

"Beg pardon!" interrupted Milly Ross, stolidly. "I'm afraid Madame will think you long coming."

"What a bugbear madame must be," said Fay, shrugging her bare shoulders, then wheeled suddenly around upon the maid. "You, Milly Ross, madame hasn't ordered you to report our conversations to her, has she? You're not to tell her all you happen to hear, I hope?"

"Not if I care to keep my ears cool," returned Ross, dryly. "Madame is too wise to have tattlers about her."

"Very considerate of madame, I say. Just lead the way then, and you, Miss Durand, give me your arm down that horrid stair."

They entered the drawing-room, still arm in arm, for Fay had so maneuvered, knowing that their differing styles would act as a foil one to the other.

The two young men bowed low as they were presented, and remained standing for a moment, passing commonplaces, until the gong sounded.

Lucian Ware stepped quickly forward and tendered his arm to Madame Durand. Madame liked attention, and Lucian was never too much absorbed to remember self-interest.

"Age before beauty, and at a sacrifice," said she, tapping him lightly with her fan and nodding her head toward the two beautiful girls.

"It is no sacrifice when they both go together, madame," returned the young man gallantly.

No hostess could be more charming than the madame when she was so disposed. This night she was the embodiment of amiability, and her sprightly *bon mots* seemed to verify her pet idiosyncrasy that cheerfulness and a good digestion are inseparable.

Mr. Thancroft, won over by the stuffed goose, relaxed the constrained official manner which always made its appearance with any thing causing him displeasure.

Erne Valere, with Fay at his side, said little; but his glance rested upon her, expressing admiration, and he listened to her light chatter in a maze that did not let him dip beneath the sparkling surface of the moment's enjoyment so vividly real to him just then. He seemed to have been transported into a brighter atmosphere since the door had opened to admit the two girls side by side. But it was Fay's form that delighted his eye, and Fay's voice made music in his ear even when he addressed himself in ordinary way to others about him.

He had been thrown but little into the society of women; he had known nothing of their gentler influence. Madame's capricious patronage came nearest to womanly tenderness that he had felt in all his life, and dazzling Fay St. Orme came like a bewildering vision, taking him at the disadvantage of total inexperience and a romantic belief in all the womanly virtues with which poets have endowed the sex.

She was, as she expressed it, looking her "sweetest." She wore a *glace* silk of a rose tint that took the light with a wondrous sheen. Her pearl-white shoulders were bare, and her glittering hair fell in a bright cascade, with no other adornment than a cluster of rose-geranium leaves of new, tender growth.

Mirabel had been allotted to the lawyer's charge, and was calmly indifferent to the fact that the goose held precedence in his mind.

They went back to the parlor when dinner was over. Lights were brought in as daylight faded, and the curtains dropped as the moon climbed slowly up.

"I don't like moonshine," said madame, "and night-dews are unhealthy. Moonshine and romance, dew-distilled and sore throats, aren't according to my programme. I hope you young people aren't foolish enough to prefer them."

"Certainly not the consequences," laughed Ware.

"I always doted on moonlight," said Fay, sweetly. "But of course madame is the wisest."

"That's right, young lady," nodded madame, approvingly. "You'll do well if you never assert your will ahead of the judgment of wiser people."

"I'm such an inexperienced little thing," cooed Fay, crossing the room to drop on an ottoman at madame's feet. "I do hope you'll advise me. I want to please you, Madame Durand, and I'm so apt to do foolish things of myself."

"That's all very well, Miss St. Orme," said madame, with a chuckle. "You wouldn't be here, let me assure you, if I didn't mean to give you the benefit of my individual views."

"It's so kind of you!"

"Oh, very kind!" Madame's sarcastic inflex conveyed little appreciation of either Fay's gratitude or her own generous action. "I suppose, Miss Durand, you are quite overcome by grateful emotions—too much overpowered to express your feelings, eh?"

"I have returned no thanks, because I do not yet understand the position I am expected to maintain here," answered Mirabel. Madame's imperious manner clashed sadly with the Durand pride as represented in Mirabel.

"Oh, then you haven't every confidence in the kindness of my intentions? But you shall not remain in ignorance!" cried madame, vivaciously. "Listen, Miss St. Orme; for you, too, will be included in my exactions."

"I shall receive you in the capacity of my youthful companions. You shall read to me in the mornings, play or sing, or embroider, just as I may feel disposed. You shall take joint charge of my laces and such portion of my wardrobe as I may choose to trust to you. Ross is my dressing-maid, but she is apt to bungle the laces. Then there's the gardening, and the household affairs, which I must have a rigid account of, and you shall see that the housekeeper's book is rightly balanced. In the afternoon you shall dress to please me, and you can walk within prescribed limits or drive with me. You shall make calls with me once a week, and share the honors on my day for receiving. We'll find plenty to occupy your time, young ladies."

"And what return shall we have for the performance of these various duties?" asked Mirabel, gravely, while Fay turned away her head to make a distressful *moue* in the direction of the two young men.

"Return!" cried madame. "Did I not say you shall be my companions? Have I not signified my intention of giving you a home at the manse? Of course I shall find your wardrobes; if you were strangers, now, I would arrange some stipulated salary, but being relatives—"

"Dependent relatives," suggested Mirabel.

"Dependent relatives," amended madame. "I shall see that you are properly provided for."

Mirabel inclined her head in silent acknowledgment, and Fay, not relishing the subject of conversation, broke the thread in her artless way.

With head drooping a little aside, she attentively regarded a portrait upon the wall.

"If that is a Durand, madame, you can never disclaim me. I've been studying myself in the mirror and making comparisons for five minutes, and if it were not for the quaint old style of dress and hairdressing, I could almost believe it to be my own portrait."

The painting represented a young blonde beauty with cast of features and bright yellow hair very much like Fay's indeed. The hair was dressed in a mass of heavy curls on the top of the head, looped there by a high comb and confined with an azure band.

The dress was a bright azure silk with pointed bodice and short puffed sleeves; a necklace of pearls and amethyst encircled the throat depending a locket of medallion shape, with a vaguely-traced monogram in crusted gems.

"It is a Durand," said madame grimly. "You shall hear her history if you like. I don't think you'll envy her much, or care to boast of any resemblance, though she was a beauty, as you may see, and a belle in her day."

"To begin: it seems a fatality that the Durand estate shall descend through female heirs. The name would have been extinct ages ago, except that the daughters of the house have clung to it, making it a provision always that their husbands shall assume the family name."

To Madame Rosalie there we owe this branch of the house. Her husband was one M. Valliers, who transformed himself into Valliers Durand when he married the heiress of a chateau and vineyard in the south of France, some two centuries ago.

M. Valliers was both young and handsome, but nevertheless he soon was violently jealous of the gay and giddy young Madame Rosalie. There were a dozen dashing cavaliers, any of whom he was ready to believe was his successful rival in madame's affections, but he was not disposed to gratify her secret wish by rushing into a duel and getting killed on her account. He was miserly of her charms, and thought to run away from his trouble by coming to America, which was enough of a wilderness then.

Husbands had greater control over their wives in that day than at the present time, and it was very much against her will that Madame Rosalie sold out her chateau and her vineyard to follow her master to the new home.

It would seem that Monsieur's distrust was not all set at rest. He brought workmen from his own land, and, when they had completed their task, sent them back again. They built here upon this very spot, but the tower is all that remains complete of their handicraft, the manse being partially torn down and rebuilt in my father's time, a hundred years ago.

After they were settled fairly, M. Valliers Durand grew exceedingly negligent of his young wife. He went on long expeditions through the almost trackless wilds, and it was reported that he found some reckless associates in the thicker settlements on the Virginia soil.

Madame Rosalie must have found it dreary, left with the little girl who was her only child, the servants, and the friendly savages that wandered her way; but she endured her seclusion wonderfully well.

So well, indeed, that M. Durand saw fit to come unexpectedly home one day, and to enter by a secret way, of which madame herself was not aware. They say that he succeeded in surprising the infatuated lover who had followed his beautiful mistress. If there was a scene it was not a violent one, but the unfortunate lover was never seen after he left the place.

They say that Monsieur became immediately very solicitous in his manner to his wife, and among other evidences of his awakening regard was the fact of his presenting her with an amethyst and pearl necklace which she had long coveted. He had let her wear it on the occasion of having her portrait painted by one of the great masters, soon after their marriage, but he was careful that she should have possession of it only for short intervals. Now he insisted that she should wear it constantly. But Madame Rosalie had no need of jewels soon after that; one tradition says that she died of remorse, another that the necklace was poisoned. The latter version would seem to have truth in it, for after her death M. Durand broke the links composing it, and destroyed every one of the alternating pearls."

Fay drew a regretful sigh, as the madame paused.

"What a pity! But then if it had been saved no one would have dared to wear it, I suppose."

"The necklace? Whatever the missing gems may have been, the amethysts were perfectly harmless. They were reset as at first, alternating with pearls, and I wore them on my wedding-day."

"Oh, mayn't we see them? that's a dear madame," coaxed Fay, entreatingly.

"Humph!" said madame, turning away abruptly. "Why, where is Lucian Ware?"

CHAPTER V.

SOME FAMILY HISTORY.

THEY looked about them in some surprise, for no one had observed Lucian quit the apartment.

"Gone out to enjoy the moonlight, I dare say," observed Erne, crossing the room to swing open the door which just stood ajar, and disclosing the piazza flooded with white, brilliant light.

"People to their tastes, but Lucian Ware might be more respectful without overdoing common civility," cried madame. "I don't admire this spirit of the age. Young people are quite too independent, too inconsiderate and ungracious in their deportment to their elders. Fifty years ago, if a youngster was bored by a prosy tale, he felt in duty bound to sit it out all the same."

"Oh, I wonder that Mr. Ware could slip away voluntarily when all the rest of us were so much interested in your story, dear Madame Durand," said Fay. "I don't see the good of making an ado over his delinquency though, since the loss is all on his side. You were quite right in saying I would not envy that richly-dressed beauty up there on the wall when I should know her history. Poor thing! one can almost pity her with the monster of a husband she had, but of course she deserved to be punished. What became of him, Madame Durand?"

"Killed by savages when pursuing one of his journeys, and served him right, too," answered madame, sententiously. "She deserved her fate, and he earned his."

"How strange it seems," said Mirabel, thoughtfully. "Every crime is followed by an atonement. Natural laws warn one against the commission of sin, since consequent punishment of some kind is inevitable."

"Stuff!" ejaculated the little lawyer, who seemed to have grown indignant and fidgety. More criminals go unhung who dearly deserve hanging, than rogues are brought to justice."

"I did not mean that the atonement is always evident," said Mirabel. "Bitter, unavailing remorse, is a powerful weapon in the cause of just retribution."

"Stuff!" ejaculated the lawyer again. "People who are bothered with extreme sensitiveness will suffer acutely for a simple fault; while others who are phlegmatic, unimaginative and hard-hearted, can commit almost any crime in the catalogue and never suffer a pang for it. The family history of the Durands can show more evidences of cruelty than this one with which we have been regaled, and not balanced by any atonement, either."

"According to your own deductions, Mr. Thancroft," cried madame, wheeling about to cast a displeased glance at him. "Don't you know you ought to be a legal anatomy, a creature with no more feeling than your own law tomes, and no more blood than your shriveled parchments? And yet you rave about sensitiveness, and cruelty, and what not, that has no business to exist at all—or, existing, you have no concern in suspecting. You are taught to judge by facts, Mr. Thancroft, but you let your own opinions get the better of your judgment sometimes."

"And there's nothing so perverse in nature, As a profound opinionator."

"Don't you know that, my good legal friend?"

"If I don't it's not for lack of illustration," retorted the lawyer.

"You are excitable, Mr. Thancroft. I think you must suffer from indigestion; nothing is more apt to make a person irritable. You should see to it; you don't know what a string of ills may arise from indigestion."

Madame's suddenly assumed solicitude was more than the lawyer could endure with equanimity.

"Heaven preserve me from heartlessness," he cried. "I am coming to almost believe in your boast, Madame Durand. I think you must have turned your heart into a gizzard. Talk of common humanity, and you preach indigestion; counsel a forgiving spirit or a just act, and I presume you would prescribe liver pills. Oh, yes, madame! I am ready to believe at last that you are heartless."

"See the curiosity you have excited in the minds of these young people, Mr. Thancroft," madame exclaimed, "and curiosity is a vulgar emotion. They are agape for more of the Durand history and they shall be gratified, this once. These young ladies shall learn the sort of obedience I shall exact from them."

"My good lawyer here has indirectly reproached me with cruelty; he has thrown out an insinuation that I ought to be walking with peas in my shoes to some distant Mecca, instead of living on fowl and game, and taking my ease here at the manse."

"That is his way of looking at the matter, but I am justified in my own sight, fully."

"You heard me say the Durand inheritance has come down through a line of females, so you will not be surprised to know that I am a true Durand."

"There is a little sequel to the history of Madame Rosalie there that is woven in with my own story. She wedded one M. Valliers, and—a point which I purposely omitted before—the unfortunate lover who paid dearly enough for his constancy was the husband's own brother."

"Now, some old tradition brings down a jingle which translated and modernized, runs something like this:

"When brother's life for brother's wife
Is shed by brother's hand,
Then curses flock—a ghastly crop—
To lot of the Durand;
Males be born but to die;
Earth and fire, water, sky,
Wildest fury shall expend
On the race to make amend;
While the curse shall still abide,
Violent deaths—their Fate—betide!
A hundred years shall pass away,
Ere male Durand shall see the day
Of granted life
For child and wife.
When brother's life for brother's wife
Shall ooze in crimson stain,
The fatal brand on the Durand
Shall be dispelled again."

"It was true that for a hundred years no male Durand lived to marry. One was buried by the sinking of a mine; another was consumed in a large conflagration; a third was drowned at sea, and a fourth was struck dead by a flash of lightning. Thus the conditions of the prophecy so far would seem to have been fulfilled. While the female Durands deplored the curse, not one but shuddered with dread at the possibility of becoming mother of more than one son. 'Brother's life for brother's wife' must be given to expiate that long-ago fratricide, and avert the Fate—which was violent deaths to all the males—from our house."

"The hundred years passed away before the birth of my son, and he was the first male of our direct line who lived to marry. By a singular coincidence his father was a descendant of the Valliers."

"There had been a feud between the two houses, so deadly that it was like a vendetta established between them, and in joining his fortune to mine my husband drew the bitterest animosity of his family upon him."

"He had not shared in the bitter feeling existing, but hatred of the Valliers had been instilled in me from my earliest childhood. It was only on condition that he would identify himself with our side by assuming our name and joining our cause that I consented to wed him."

"He did it, but the concession was fatal to him. In less than three months afterward he shared the Fate which had befallen the male Durands."

"He was brought home dead from a hunting excursion, shot through the side, by accident, they said."

"But I was sure he had fallen victim to the hatred of the Valliers, and I vowed an additional vow to maintain the feud which existed."

"When my boy was born some months later I renewed the vow, and consecrated him to the task of wreaking vengeance upon his father's murderer."

"Time passed on until Jules became of age. I had been anxious—fearful that the Fate might overtake him, but I dismissed the fear then and urged him to marry. While I had little faith in the rhyming prophecy, I wanted to see our house strengthened by brave lads, who, in time would avenge the injuries we had received at the hands of our enemies."

"I selected a fitting wife for Jules, the daughter of a wealthy Virginia planter, whose family was old and honorable as our own."

"For the first time in his life my son disobeyed me. He would marry, he said, only the woman his heart had chosen."

"Imagine my horror when I discovered he had fallen in love with a penniless girl, and worse still—a Valliers!"

"I exhorted him to renounce the traitress—in blood she was a traitress—and to consummate the revenge which his father's death demanded."

"He refused utterly. He married the girl in defiance of my will, and from that day he was to me as one of the hated family he had openly espoused."

"I never saw him again in life. But two years later the woman who had enticed him away from me came to beg at my gates. Her husband, she said, lay dying at a little village twenty miles away. He had come that far on his way to the manse to implore my forgiveness, and to beg my care for his wife and child."

"He should have known that I never forgive."

"But twenty miles away he had succumbed—to what, think you? Simply, starvation!"

"She implored me in my son's name, and I answered her that I had no son. I learned then what I had not known before—that she was the last of the Valliers as he was the last of our branch of the Durands; but there was the child in her arms, a puny, tiny infant, but it had the detested blood in its veins."

"I let her rave, but I would not listen to her, and I sent her away with no word of consolation for the man who was reaping the fruits of his error. Three days after that I heard that Jules Durand had died—a suicide! He had brought the Fate upon himself."

"And now, Mr. Thancroft there would reproach me for my part in that little drama of life and death. *Ma foi!* what a world it is when another's follies are transformed into our faults."

"I have nothing with which to reproach myself, and I regret nothing."

Madame paused, but seemed to reiterate her last words in the light, measured tap of her stick upon the floor.

The young people ventured upon no remark, and the pitiless old woman who sat there telling her tale with as much composure as if it had been an idle day's gossip, passed her wrinkled jeweled hands one over the other and chuckled softly to herself as she peered in her round-eyed bird-like fashion alternately into the faces of each to read the expressions there.

"Ah, madame!" cried the lawyer, "you compel me to take up the tale in your own defense. Heaven knows that you were hard enough, and I have always disapproved your course, but you were not so remorselessly cruel as you leave these young people to infer."

"It was but natural you should feel anger at your son's waywardness, but you forget that it was your own spirit reproduced in him, encouraged moreover by your own example, which prompted him. I declare that you were harsh—cruelly harsh!—to the young woman, Jules's wife, when she pleaded your forgiveness for her husband. But I do not think you actually comprehended the sore strait to which they were reduced."

"The poor child—she was nothing but a child—was half-crazed by sorrow and want. You did not realize that until afterward, I am sure. Relentless as you were, you would not willingly have consigned your son to such a death."

"You thought it an artifice—a deceit practiced to influence you to receive his wife and child. You were wrong, you know; but I have always found that much excuse for you."

"I think when you had considered a little you would have gone in search of them, but for the discovery of a rash act which Jules's wife had committed."

"The necklace of pearls and amethysts, which lay in its case upon your dressing-table, was missing, and you knew that she alone could have taken it. You said, wrathfully, 'Let it go; it is the only portion they shall ever have.'"

"But, when you heard that Jules was dead—so awfully dead—you went at once to that little village, twenty miles from here. You were not subdued, or merciful, or forgiving, even then. If you felt sorrow no one ever knew it. He was a suicide, and his body could not be laid in consecrated ground, but you caused it to be privately buried in a spot which had been a favorite haunt of his in his wayward, boisterous boyhood."

"Ah, madame, madame!" cried the lawyer, brokenly, raising his clasped hands toward her, as if he were appealing mercy for himself.

"How you conquered remorse and despair, then, I know not. How you could see the bright young life—such a happy life as it had been once, and you so proud of it—blotted out so foully, ended so sorrowfully, with not a curse hurled back at you from the border of eternal space, but a muttered prayer that you might be forgiven—how you could know that the outstretching of your hand would have saved him, and not go mad with self-horror and reproach, I can not know."

Madame's bright black eyes, fixed upon the lawyer's face, had never wavered nor dimmed.

Her hands, lying in her lap, had been quiescent, but now she caught up the stick by her side and rapped sharply upon the floor.

"Enough, Mr. Thancroft. Quite enough of such rhapsodizing. I don't like it—I detest it. A man of your age and a lawyer! you should be ashamed of your weakness, sir!"

"Ah, madame, Heaven alone knows from whence you derive your inflexible strength. But to continue:

"You gave money to relieve the wants of Jules's loved ones. The poor young wife was stricken down very near to the gates of death, but you made no attempt to console her in her wild grief. You made provision for her wants and stipulated that the child should be well cared for, but when she rallied she would accept nothing at your hands."

"What became of her or the boy I never knew except that you afterward told me she was dead, but the lad was alive and well. You know how I begged and prayed you to bring him here, your own son's son; at least he was innocent of all wrong against you. But you would not, nor would you let me know his whereabouts; had you done so, I would have sought him out and provided for him as if he had been of my own blood."

Slowly madame rose up from her chair. So quick was she in her ordinary movements, so surprisingly quick for one of her age, that this deliberate action had something awfully portentous in it. She spoke, and her tone was distinct but heavy, as if some weight was upon her tongue, yet her words were only commonplace in themselves.

"Bah! you tire me, sir, and you have redeemed me no more than I would have wished by your unbased suppositions. We have dwelt upon the dead full long enough, suppose we return to the interest of the hour."

"I want to know what is Lucian Ware about all this time? You, Mirabel, play me something on the harmonium there, while you other two and Lucian and bring him here."

She waved her hand and sunk back into her chair, with her face in the shadow.

Erne, with Fay at his side, went out upon the moonlit piazza; while Mirabel seated herself at the quaint old harmonium to draw out quivering strains, which, in their cracked melody, had the same reminder of old-time sweetness that still marked the abrupt tone of Madame Durand.

And not one of them all had a suspicion of the icy chill which was stealing up the madame's side, chaining her limbs in a dead numbness, stealing away the powers of motion and speech, but never dimming the brightness of the unwavering glance fixed straight on the empty space before her.

CHAPTER VI.

A SUDDEN SHOCK.

ERNE VALERE, with Fay upon his arm, went out into the moonlit court with a feeling as though he had been suddenly transported to Paradise. This fair-haired, tiny creature, this dainty bit of flesh and blood, this silver-voiced siren, had fairly bewitched him in the few brief hours they were thrown together.

She dazzled his eyes like an angelic vision, and entranced his senses by her *naivete*, her child-like candor and seeming innocence, which, had he but known it, were all deceptive wiles.

They paused for a moment in the moonlit space, with the sweet odors of the blooming plants about them, and the stillness of the night brooding down.

"I don't much wonder Mr. Lucian preferred so much beauty to that dingy, cooped-up room," said Fay, with a shrug of the bare dimpled shoulders, which gleamed above the shawl she had drawn loosely about her. "I admire his liking for the open night, but not his taste for solitude. I don't like to be left alone, ever."

"I am sure there must be plenty who wish you never need be," said Erne, timidly. So little accustomed to ladies' society was he that the compliment implied fell trippingly from his tongue. But if his expression was awkward, the eloquent light in his dark eyes made atonement for the fault.

"Delightful!" thought Fay. "I'm sure I'd have died if I hadn't found somebody to flirt with."

"There," she said, in her pretty, child-like manner, "I suppose you mean something, but I'm sure I don't know. I hope you're not in the habit of flattering people, Mr. Valere."

"Not I," he replied, smiling.

"That sounded like a compliment, you know, and I don't like people to say pretty things to me just for politeness' sake."

"I am not an adept in the art of saying 'pretty things,'" he returned quietly. "In all that I say be sure I am always sincere."

"Oh, then I'll be sure that I have one friend here in my new home. It seemed like leaving every thing that was bright in the world to come away from all who loved me to this wilderness of a place. To tell you the truth, I couldn't reconcile myself at first. But then mamma was so dreadfully poor, and though uncle St. Orme is rich, he has a half-dozen girls of his own to provide for. They were all horribly plain, too; and the gentlemen would always send up their cards to me—though I didn't want them to, and—Well, it used to make the girls disagreeable and cross."

She glanced up into his face deprecatingly, as if she feared he too might disapprove, but he only pressed her hand silently in sympathy.

"Mamma had a proposal to travel as companion to an invalid lady friend just at the time madame's invitation was forwarded to me through Mr. Thancroft. I knew it would be so much pleasanter for her than remaining dependent upon my uncle, so I assured her that I was quite willing to be forwarded to madame's care. I'm afraid you would think me a dreadfully selfish thing if I should tell you how hard my own struggle was."

"It was natural," said Erne. "You knew nothing of the new friends to whom you were coming, and the separation from your mother would be very hard to bear. But harder, I am sure, for her to lose so considerable a daughter."

"Just what I thought," said Fay, sweetly, "and I would not grieve her where I could help. So I pretended that the summer passed up here in the mountains would be delightful pastime, and when that was over, I would be quite reconciled to the drearier aspect of the place so long as I could know that she was happy and comfortable. It wasn't so very wicked to fib a little in such a case, do you think?"

"Very pardonable," smiled Erne. "The more so that I hope and believe you will prove it all true yet."

Engrossed and enraptured as he was, he would have forgotten their mission utterly but Fay reminded him of it.

"Now, Mr. Valere, if you've any idea of the crooks and corners into which that inconsiderate but sensible young man may have strayed, suppose we endeavor to find him out. Madame

will think we are tardy, and I don't want her to be vexed with me. What a funny old woman she is!"

"Funny?" interrogated Erne.

"Yes. So tiny, and she flies about in the queerest and most unexpected way. She dresses so oddly, too, and says such horrid things just as though she really meant them."

"She does mean them," he replied, gravely. "I believe she is just as hard, unforgiving, and unmerciful, as she claims herself to be. She turned against her own son, as she told us to-night, though he only followed in her own steps by marrying a 'Valliers.'"

He would have continued, but Fay threw back her head with an eager look.

"I didn't think before," she cried, "but isn't that your name? Are you one of those Vallierses?"

"No, my name is Valere. There is a similarity in the sound, but they are differently spelled."

"Oh!" said Fay, with a disappointed intonation. "It would be so nice if you were one of them. Who knows what sort of a relationship we might patch up between us, the Durands and Valliers so intermixed, according to madame's story?"

"But in that case, madame would never have interested herself in me, and I would not have met you. It seems strange that two families so bound by ties of blood should have been so bitterly hostile; it would be hard to tell where the feud should end and clanship begin."

"I can't help wishing you were a Valliers," persisted Fay. "And then, if madame should take the notion to marry you to one of the Durands, to bury the feud and leave you all her property, it would be such a charming romance in real life. Don't you think the changes time is sure to make might account for the change in your name?"

Erne laughed.

"Even romance does not weave itself out so easily, Miss Fay. You forget all the distresses the hero and the heroine are sure to endure."

"What a splendid place for a compliment," thought Fay. "Why don't he say he'd be willing to brave all sorts of danger if I were the heroine? Stupid! I'm sure the other one wouldn't let such an opportunity slip."

The other one meant Lucian Ware. Fay, superficial as she was, had rightly divined the different natures of the two young men.

Erne Valere was too thoroughly honest and true to utter light assurances, even though his heart might prompt them.

"No," he went on replying to her question. "I do not think the name I bear is corrupted from that of madame's enemies. If it were, it would bring me no nearer the Durands, for my right to it is only nominal. I was a nameless waif, and my earliest remembrance is of a harsh woman whose name I can not remember, except that it was different from the one she bestowed on me, and that she impressed upon my childish understanding was not rightfully mine."

"It comes back to me sometimes, like an almost forgotten dream, hazy, indistinct—the vision of my early childhood's days."

"In all the time since, I have never had any one to care for me until madame chose to take an interest in my welfare."

"And although she is eccentric to an extreme, whimsical and oftentimes overbearing, seemingly without natural affection, cynical, and to a certain extent misanthropic, yet I am drawn toward her by something more than a mere feeling of gratitude. I think it must be that I realize true womanly nobility beneath the crust she has encouraged to overgrow her generous impulses."

Fay put up her little dimpled hand to conceal a yawn, then raised it, warning him to silence.

"I thought I heard voices."

"It is scarcely probable. There is the tower, and the servants are not fond of lurking hereabouts after nightfall. I think we must seek Lucian in some other direction."

As he spoke, a muttered growl and snarl saluted their ears.

A tawny body with gleaming red eyes made a rush at them from the dark shadow of the tower.

"Oh! what is that?" screamed Fay, in wild affright, clutching Erne's arm.

"Down, Bruno, down!" he commanded. "Do not be alarmed, Miss St. Orme. It is only the watchdog, but he is a savage brute and should not be unchained at this early hour. Bruno: quiet, sir! How did you come from your kennel, I should like to know?"

"Oh," cried Fay, trembling and clinging to him still, as the dog fell back, yet eyed them viciously. "The great horrid brute. Do come away; I am fairly sick with fright."

Erne's heart gave a great throb as he glanced down at her. The temptation was strong to clasp her close in his arms where she might find a refuge always on his real, true heart.

But while the intoxicating thought wavered like a flash through his brain, Ware came out from the shadow of the tower, speaking angrily to the dog.

"Away with you, Bruno! What do you

mean by such disgraceful conduct? Begone to your kennel, sir?"

Then approaching them he doffed his cap with an air of mock humility.

"What shall my penance be? I have been the cause of frightening a lady through thoughtlessly unfastening the dog."

"Bruno should not be unchained when any except members of the ordinary family are around," said Erne, gravely. "He has a surly temper, and a more serious consequence might result. It is by madame's express order that he is kept close, you know."

"Oh, madame is full of quips," retorted Ware, carelessly. "I am only sorry that Miss St. Orme has been alarmed. What were you doing—watching the moon? I envy you, Valerie! I did not plead for the pleasure of the ladies' companionship through respect of the madame's expressed disfavor."

"She sent us in search of you, half an hour ago."

"A man's soul wouldn't be his own, if madame could command it," grumbled Lucian Ware. "What did she suppose I would do—desecrate her floral geometry, or steal through the secret passage they say is somewhere in the manse, to make off with her valuables? Let us go back to set her mind at rest. Don't let this preposterous madame intimidate you, Miss St. Orme. A pretty time you'll have of it if she once gets you under her thumb."

"I should use my counter-charm," said Fay. "I believe in conquering by love."

"I wish you would fight a battle with me," declared Lucian, gallantly. "I should take such pleasure in being defeated."

They turned to go indoors, and a dim form that had been lurking in the densest shadow unseen by either Erne or Fay, sped silently away toward another portion of the house. It was only the confidential maid, Milly Ross.

But two bits of evidence—that scrap of rustling paper drawn from the glove, and this tryst kept beneath the tower-walls—might fit significantly together.

Mirabel was at the harmonium still, but arose as they entered.

She glanced smilingly toward Mr. Thancroft nodding in his chair, and turned toward the figure sitting half in shadow.

"Have I soothed madame to sleep also?" she asked, softly. "My music exerted greater influence than I thought."

Fay danced across the room and dropped on the stool by the old lady's side.

"Such a fright as I've had," she began, reaching her soft fingers to caress the shriveled hand on which diamonds gleamed brightly.

She sprang up with a horrified cry—her touch had met another, cold, clammy, death-like.

"Oh, she is dead! She is dead!" shrieked Fay, and straightway relapsed into hysteria.

CHAPTER VII.

MADAME'S WARNING.

THEY gathered, an awe-stricken group, about the great arm-chair and its silent occupant.

Fay, groveling on the floor in an excess of terror, shrieked and tore her fair hair unheeded, until Lucian Ware, with a face that, in its distorted, pallid intensity, was like the face of some unholy spirit, beautiful still, but baleful in its stamp of baffled rage, lifted her in his arms and placed her on a couch.

Then Erne put his hand on the great chair, wheeling it about to face the light.

The slight, erect figure in its rich brocade, with jeweled hands clasped loosely in the lap, was rigid and motionless as death itself. The lips were blue, and drawn apart, the soft, rich texture of the shriveled skin changed to a death-like hue, but the eyes were wells of glittering light.

Even in that awful hour Madame Durand's glance never softened to implore those about her. The expression of the gleaming black orbs was one of impatience and command—bitter, hard, unwavering, as in all the undeviating course she had traversed.

It would seem that no afflicting power could bend or break the madame's indomitable spirit.

"Oh, not dead!" cried the lawyer, in tense, sharp tones. "Thank Heaven! not dead!"

A sigh of ineffable relief broke over Mirabel's lips. She dropped her soft palms on the wrinkled brow, clammy as with the dews of death. Then she began to unloose the priceless lace at madame's throat, but a flash of those gleaming eyes arrested her movement.

The pale lips quivered slightly, but no articulate sound passed them. Mirabel interpreted the unuttered word with intuitive quickness.

"Ross?—I will find her for you. Mr. Thancroft, for Heaven's sake, do something quickly."

She sped away with almost incredible swiftness, and Mr. Thancroft turned his face toward Erne, with big, cold drops, wrung by intense emotion, standing on his brow.

"It is a paralytic stroke," he said, "and not the first. Send some one for Doctor Gaines, in all haste."

"I will go myself," returned Erne, hurriedly quitting the apartment.

After the first confusion of the shock, every thing was done with system and dispatch.

Lucian Ware came forward with quiet address, and lifting the palsied figure, tenderly bore madame to her own chamber. Ross came and waited on her helpless mistress, who was rallying already from the first severity of the stroke, and all waited with painful anxiety the coming of the physician.

Mirabel, meantime, busied herself in attempting to relieve the distress of Fay St. Orme. But the latter screamed and sobbed and shuddered under the appliance of ice to her temples, the laving of her brow with perfumed water, and chafing of the hands and wrists, which Mirabel adopted. The housekeeper prescribed soothing drops, but Fay clenched her little white teeth and refused to swallow them.

"Will you stop that intolerable noise?" cried the lawyer, pausing in his nervous strides back and forth across the apartment. "It may be life or death to Madame Durand that all excitement be kept from her."

"She is quite wild with affright," explained Mirabel. "When she understands that madame is not really dead, she will grow quieter, I think."

"Fuss and fol-de-rol!" ejaculated Mr. Thancroft. "She is sensible as you or I; I'm sure she has no more cause for fright. Here, bring me a pail of water, some one, and I'll bring her to her senses."

Without waiting an answer to his order, he rushed away, and in two minutes' time was heard returning.

Fay's convulsive starts grew less apparent; she no longer screamed, but moaned faintly as she lay upon the cushions.

"Oh, oh, oh!" she breathed faintly and shudderingly as the lawyer drew near.

He raised the water pitcher he carried, threateningly, above her, as her eyelids trembled and slightly unclosed.

"See here, young lady," he said, grimly, "you'll oblige all concerned by keeping perfectly quiet. I've seen people have hysteria before to-day, and know something about their management. Nothing so good as pure, cold water; so if you scream or struggle again, you'll receive the benefit of two quarts or more, and I'm afraid it might ruin your dress. That will do, Miss Durand; I'll keep watch for a time."

"Oh!" screamed Miss St. Orme, faintly, with symptoms of relapsing into another paroxysm; but a few drops of the ice-cold water slipped into her face quieted her again.

Had not Mirabel been possessed of grave fears for Madame Durand, she would have smiled at the ludicrousness of the scene—the lawyer, grim and threatening, holding his pitcher aloft, Fay furtively watching him and endeavoring to suppress her shuddering sighs, for she had really worked herself into state of a high nervous excitement which even the selfishness which formed the chief element in her character could scarcely command.

The measure was harsh but salutary, and Miss St. Orme was soon recovered sufficiently to retire to her own apartment, where one of the housemaids was deputed to attend her.

In half an hour's time Erne clattered back to the door, accompanied by Doctor Gaines, who devoted all his skill to the relief of Madame Durand, with partial success.

The generous stimulants he applied brought an appearance of life back into the numbed, stricken body. The power of speech came with it, though the utterance was labored and slow.

Madame was in no further immediate danger, the physician said; she might recover the use of her limbs—he thought it most probable, she possessed so much of strong animal life; but for the time she must exercise patience and remain wholly unexcited.

Patience, in the manner of his meaning, was something new to the experience of Madame Durand. She had put an iron curb upon her affections, and literally ground out the tender sympathies which belong to the unperverted feminine nature, but she had never put check to her fancied desires nor controlled her impulses. She had covered by the garb of eccentricity the intense restlessness of a life barren of the satisfactory results which might have turned it into a smooth, pleasant, useful channel.

How much of the great, sorrowful mistake could be properly visited upon herself, how much ascribed to the force of early training, an intensity of natural passions, and the course of attendant events, it were a bootless effort to attempt determining.

But to this pass had madame come, and for this night at least she was willing to swallow the opiate which the physician prepared, and with Ross watching by her side, drift through an obscurity of painful apathy which was neither consciousness of her own strait nor the tense influence of unbased visions. It may have been an undefined regret for the distorted past, it may have been a dim prescience of time and events to come.

When Doctor Gaines left the madame's room and was let out into the court, dark except for

the light of the dying moon and the star-gleams, he was scarcely surprised to find the impulsive little old lawyer waiting him there.

"Have you a vacant place in your gig, doctor?" asked the latter, familiarly. "I know you'd be willing to go out of your way any day or night to accommodate me."

"If you don't object to crowding and don't attempt to interview me," returned the other, linking arms with his old friend as they walked down through the grounds to the avenue gates.

"But the last is just what I propose doing."

"Waylaid me for the purpose, eh?"

"Exactly. At least I started my clerk ahead with that view. I want the truth of the madame's case."

"Well, didn't you hear it?"

"I heard your report at the house."

"What more do you want, my friend?"

"I want a plain statement, I say. See here, Gaines, haven't you enough confidence in my discretion to break through professional reserve this once? I've got reason enough for pressing you, be assured."

"Well, then, I gave them truth straight enough up there, but not all of it. Madame's chance for ultimate recovery isn't one out of a thousand. She'll be better, she'll improve very rapidly, until some passion or excitement brings on the final fatal attack. So long as she's kept calm and quiet, she is tolerably safe; but you know she's no more to be ruled than the elements are."

The lawyer groaned audibly.

"There, don't be so disheartened," said the doctor, encouragingly. "You'll find lost pickings neatly summed up in a bequest without doubt; for my part, I don't owe much to the prime old gentlewoman. Her superior digestion left little room for the exercise of my profession, you see."

It was less lack of all feeling on the doctor's part which prompted his remark than a desire to divert his friend from the saddest aspect such a case must present.

"I wish I was sure of others faring as well as I shall, which means only that I'll get my just dues—neither more nor less."

"Here's the trouble, Gaines. Madame can't be induced to make her will or to discover to Jules's son his own rights."

"If she dies without revealing his personality, he may never know his true name or station, and Lord only knows to what winds the Durand estates will be scattered."

"The madame should be apprised of her own danger, doctor, believe me."

"The knowledge of it would send her into the very passion we wish to avoid."

"No; madame is too sensible when rightly approached. She must see the necessity for quiet action, and yield to it."

"Nevertheless, I'll not take the risk," declared the doctor; and Mr. Thancroft, in a perturbation of spirit, pondered the livelong night without deciding the exact letter of his duty.

Neither did all sleep at the manse that night; but to trace out the thread, we must go back for an hour or two.

The maid who waited upon Fay St. Orme had none of the discreet silence which pertained to Milly Ross. She was the housekeeper's niece, and all her life passed here gave her a knowledge of the Durand history without putting the seal of silent caution upon her lips.

"It's awful, to be sure," said the gossiping maid, "but folks always said the madame were a-tempting of retribution onto her. It's not me to say, and she's been kind enough to u— aside from putting that mealy-faced Ross over us all, but the madame has flew in the face of Providence from first to last. Those as go back on their own flesh and blood isn't like to have many to mourn 'em when it comes to such a visitation."

"I've heard the story," said Fay, who was not averse to glean knowledge by even this reprehensible method. "Don't you suppose that madame will send for the little boy, her grandson, now that she is so ill?"

"Lor', he's a grown man afore this time," replied the girl. Fay had assumed this ignorance simply for the sake of drawing her out, without direct questioning. "He's older than I by full two years. My aunt was here then, and she's told me many a time how the poor young thing looked—fair, famished as she was—and the baby in her arms, that was just its father's born image, but the madame was never moved no way at all."

"Aunt says that she believes to this day that madame seen an ill-omen that night. She went into her room, and found her white and shivering as a ghost, but the madame pretended it was only because her necklace was lost. That was enough to bring bad luck, she said."

"Madame believes in omens?" Fay inquired, carelessly.

"She's reason to," returned the girl, solemnly. "She's brought enough sorrow onto herself by disregarding 'em. You saw the pacter in the parlor, miss!"

Fay nodded.

"Well, it's counted a tempting of Providence to follow after the track of that one in any

way whatsoever. But no sooner was our madame married and settled down, than she goes and orders a dress precisely like the one Madame Rosalie is painted in. She had it made all in secret they say, and dressed in it till she looked like the very picture stepped from its frame. She meant to surprise her husband, she said, when he'd come home from the hunting where he'd gone that day.

"And, miss, he was brought home stark dead."

"Ugh!" shuddered Fay.

"Madame took off the dress and the other things, and put them away with her own hands in the very bottom of a great cedar-wood chest, where they've laid ever since, never seeing the light of day, except once a year, when she takes 'em out to brush and air."

"Have you seen them?" asked Fay, with awakened interest.

"I wouldn't durst let the madame know," said the girl, with a frightened look. "You see, since aunt has got rheumatic I keep the lumber-room key, and do the dusting and sorting there. I just took a peep into that chest one day, and the gown and all are there, kept fresher'n you'd think from being always in the dark. I'll let you see it some day if you like, miss."

The maid slept on an impromptu couch, in Fay's room that night. The young lady declared herself too nervous and unstrung to be left quite alone, and made this suggestion when Mirabel offered to share her apartment.

The housekeeper's niece slept soundly, never suspecting the train of consequences her gossip had set in motion.

It was the dark hour before the dawn, and Milly Ross drowsed in her watch by madame's bedside.

A faint rustle in the room did not arouse her, but madame, with wide-open, gazing eyes, saw a figure float past her perspective view. A figure wearing the dress of azure silk, the mass of golden hair looped high by the old-style comb, and the cold, proud face of Madame Rosalie Durand as pictured on the canvas hanging below.

Milly Ross woke suddenly to meet the intense gaze of her mistress.

"I have been warned, Ross," said madame, with slow, calm utterance. "I have seen Rosalie Durand."

Milly shuddered, knowing that other Durand superstition which the apparition foretold—that the person seeing it should meet death as did fair, false Rosalie—by poison!

CHAPTER VIII.

A FORTUNE REJECTED.

ELEVEN next day saw Mr. Thancroft toiling up the steep, rocky footpath, which led to the manse.

The true-hearted little lawyer had taken his resolution at last, and was on his way to face madame, gently as might be, with the hopelessness of her case, and, in his unwavering fidelity, beseech her once more to relent toward the outcast scion of the house.

"I wouldn't shake her hold on life by so much as a breath," he muttered, as he stamped excitedly on up the rocky pathway. "I wouldn't even for the sake of Jules Durand's boy, but her span of years is so near the end, and his is all before him."

"Not one chance in a thousand, Gaines said, but if it were the nine hundred and ninety-nine she had, madame would throw them all away before she'd bend that haughty spirit."

"There must be some way to reach her—some way to soften her—if I could but find it. She has no feeling on any subject except the subject of death, and she dreads that, but has always shrunk from it as a horror that stands aloof in the far future."

"Heaven grant the knowledge that it threatens her so closely may awaken the better promptings which she must experience, or stain the blank of her eternal future by letting a deliberate wrong go unrighted."

"Ah, madame, it's not so foul a neglect while you're here to rule your own, as it will be if strangers succeed you, and your son's boy be lost to all the noble chances of life as to his ancestral rights."

"Ah, madame, madame! I alone of them all know how you have walked over thorns without flinching. I have seen the agony when it rose up too intolerable for calmly bearing, and you rode over it in one of the tempestuous passions that people called demoniacal, and feared you for possessing. But you never admitted the truth to even yourself, and I can't hope that you'll do it now."

With sorrowful face bent toward the ground, he pursued the remainder of his way, dejectedly musing.

The staid old man-servant answered his muffled rap, and ushered him into the silent room, where madame had been wont to receive him.

Her great chair, with the cloth of purple and gold draping it like a vacant throne, and the richly wrought, time-dimmed footstool, were in their accustomed places; but the queer, erect

little figure would never sit there in state, and announce her whimsical mandates to this faithful servitor of hers—never again.

With a deep sigh, the little lawyer turned his back upon the familiar appointments of the room, and stared through the open window into the little court where every tree and plant breathed an odorous message of madame's care of it.

"How bright the sunshine is," he murmured, passing his hand across his dimming eyes impatiently. "What a mocking world it is to look so serene, yet to lay so many pitfalls for our steps through it, and to watch us fade like late blossoms without a passing cloud of pity."

"Ah, nonsense! What has come over me that I should be thinking such sentimental school-girl twaddle. Indigestion, madame would say, if she could know it."

The softly opened door put a stop to his reverie. Mirabel came in with the subdued air which pervaded all the place.

"Madame will see you at once in her own chamber," said Mirabel.

"How is she?" asked the lawyer, lingering. Of the two young dependent relatives of the madame, Mr. Thancroft was impressed much in favor of Miss Durand, as he was impatient and distrustful of Fay St. Orme.

"Wonderfully improved, Ross reports," Mirabel replied. "I have not seen her since midnight."

She did not consider it necessary to add that this was owing wholly to the madame's caprice. Mirabel had volunteered to share Ross's watch through the night, but had been unequivocally refused; again, this morning she had rapped early at madame's door and proffered her services, but with the same result.

Madame Durand had not succumbed to the helplessness which had fallen upon her. The lawyer found her with her silver hair smoothly dressed, beneath the tiny cap of delicate lace which she always wore; a loose silk dressing-robe was drawn about her shoulders, and she was propped to a reclining posture in the great canopied bed which had been wheeled close to the open windows.

Her hands lay upon the light coverlet, and a little of the lost power had come back to the right.

She could move it painfully, and the fingers were growing more flexible with each passing hour.

Ross had been chafing the deadened limbs with powerful liniment, but now, at a glance from her mistress, she withdrew to the opposite side of the large apartment.

"Welcome," said madame, turning her keen bright eyes upon the lawyer. "I expected you, or I should have sent."

"You wanted me?" asked he, brightening. "How do you find yourself this morning, dear Madame Durand?"

"Bah! fiddlesticks! better, you see," madame replied. She spoke clearly, and in her old, abrupt, vehement manner, but her utterance was painfully slow. "My appetite is good—good. I had an omelet and a pigeon's breast for breakfast, Mr. Thancroft, and dry toast and French coffee, and I relished them all. What do you think of that?"

"Good," said the lawyer, mechanically.

There was a striking disparity between madame's labored speech and the commonplace burden of it. Her peering bird-glance read his expression of shocked surprise, and she chuckled audibly.

"Do you think because I'm afflicted I should make a martyr of myself also?" she asked. "No, no, Mr. Thancroft! With an appetite, a clear conscience and a good digestion, I'll keep in cheerful tone to the end of my days."

"Which I pray Heaven may be long yet," uttered the lawyer, solemnly.

"Pray if you like, but I don't believe in prayers," asserted madame, with her old cynical emphasis, despite her slow utterance. "Prayer never kept the pot boiling without some hard work to aid it. Prayer will not lengthen our life when the extremity is reached; but ordinary care and no dyspepsia will make it worth the living while it lasts. I've passed three score and ten, my friend, and I'm very near to the end."

"You look grave, though you'll not have much to regret, Mr. Thancroft. Will you miss the tyrannical old task-mistress, think you?"

"Madame," cried the lawyer, in much distress, "you overwhelm me with grief when you speak so."

"There," I'll not be contradicted," interrupted the madame. "And you shall not agree with me, either, for I'll not have any one cringe to please me because I'm near death."

"And I'll not cringe to you," declared Mr. Thancroft. "But, ah, madame! will it not be well to make your peace here as a preparation for the great hereafter?"

Madame was powerless to turn her head, but her right hand wavered slightly up, and her keen eyes flashed brilliantly upon him.

"Don't begin by angering me, Mr. Thancroft. Neither you nor any one else shall influence me from my own set course. Give me my own time, my own way, and I may take you into

my confidence; but provoke me, and you'll only defeat your own wishes."

Madame lay back upon the pillow, panting from her vehemence. Her labored respiration, and the slight purplish flush which had risen to her face, brought the physician's warning in full force to the lawyer's mind.

He bowed his head, and remained silent, lest some hasty expression of his might tend to increase her agitation.

Madame's wide eyes gleamed upon him, searching his subdued, sorrowful countenance.

"Old friend," she resumed, more softly, "let us pass by all the quibbles we have been in the habit of striking against. Let the old troubles rest forever after this."

"I see that you wonder at my unconcern in the face of my dire dread of death. It's because I know it to be inevitable, and I'd scorn to shrink or struggle before my fate."

"Gaines may be mistaken," began the lawyer, in the natural desire which people seem always to possess to raise up hope where none exists."

"Has he given up my case?" queried madame, sharply.

"Oh, no! I thought he must have told you. He only realizes attendant danger."

"Tell me exactly."

"You must keep yourself very calm, madame. Any sudden passion or strong excitement might prove fatal."

Madame's suppressed chuckle was expressive of such ill-timed, ghastly mirth, that the lawyer started nervously, and stared at her in unconcealed wonderment.

"Oh, wonderful prescience," cried she, in bitter mockery. "Oh, cultivated foreknowledge! And when the test comes—because he predicted it—our obtuse Doctor Gaines will declare that I have died from natural causes."

"Listen to me, Mr. Thancroft. I shall come to my death by no fair means. My life shall be foully wrested away, for all that my span of years is so nearly run. Will you see that I do not go unavenged? You don't believe me now, but you will. I tell you that I shall die unfairly—a Durand death. I have been warned. I have seen the specter of Rosalie Durand."

The lawyer stared at her dumbly.

"I lay helpless in my bed with Ross by me, but she had fallen into a momentary doze. I could see through the windows that the stars were blotted out in the inky blackness just before day. I was wide awake as I am at this moment. Rosalie Durand, in her azure robe, her face fair in its winning loveliness, as it is painted, floated slowly across my sight. It was neither a vision nor an optical delusion. It was a warning, my friend—a warning that I shall be betrayed to death as she was. Promise me that you will look for traces of poison when all is over."

"Ah, madame! whom could you suspect?" he asked, incredulous. "You are not apt to yield to superstition. You were certainly dreaming, madame."

"No, no!" said madame, slowly, impressively. "I do not suspect you, though you mean to leave me an unavenged victim."

"If you are not the victim of a mere delusion, you shall not go unavenged!" cried the lawyer, with emotion.

"Thanks, my friend," uttered madame. "I can trust you."

She relapsed into sudden silence, and Mr. Thancroft waited in grave anxiety for the revelation he thought she must make now and the commission he hoped she might put upon him.

Madame perceived his expectant look, and divined its origin.

"Don't wait," she said, imperatively. "That's all I want of you now, but I may give you work before long."

"Oh, madame; see that you do not defer it too long," urged he.

"Come to-morrow then—to-morrow at this hour. Come prepared to draw up my will in due form. There, my friend; no comments, and no advice. Call Ross here, please."

Ross came, and the lawyer took his departure, not half satisfied by that much concession from the madame, but not daring to urge his plea further from fear of arousing the wayward opposition which it was so useless to combat.

"I want to rest for an hour," said madame to her maid. "Then bring me luncheon, and when it is over below, send Erne Valere and Miss Durand here together."

Ross smoothed the pillows and turned the screens before the windows, then withdrew quietly.

"Can it mean any thing—calling the two together?" asked Ross of herself. "Madame will be sure to send me away if it does, though she's so free at times. I must provide for the chance—I don't like to play such a part, but I must this once."

She passed with a noiseless, gliding step, into the room adjoining madame's. It was simply an antechamber of exceedingly singular shape, being a corner cut off by the circular stairway, leaving the third side of what would otherwise have been a triangle, a convex curve of wall, black except for a door opening upon a staircase landing. Another door led into madame's

chamber, and a swinging casement opened upon a long, narrow balcony which ran above the court.

The strange appearance of this anteroom was heightened by a paved floor of red and black. It was paneled with black walnut, and the one window was draped with dingy red damask, which lent a lurid glow to the light that fell through.

There were many dim nooks in the old manse, but none more suggestive of mystery than this one communicating with madame's apartment.

Milly Ross swung the casement wide, and dropped the curtain before the opened space.

The balcony was filled with greenery—tall flowering shrubs in stone vases of fantastic shapes, and great urns with vines trained from them over the windows. And the balcony was inaccessible except from these two rooms.

Madame slept a short, refreshing sleep, and awoke to partake of her luncheon with her usual zest.

Then Erne Valere and Mirabel Durand came up the spiral stairway and were admitted into madame's presence for the first time that day.

"Don't trouble yourselves about my state of health, young people," said madame, when Erne would have expressed his solicitude. "It's a waste of breath, and my breath is precious, if yours is not; besides, Ross can tell you all that. Where is Ross?"

Milly advanced to the bedside.

"You can go now, Ross. Miss Durand will ring when you're wanted again."

"Come nearer," said madame, when Ross had gone. "Here, Miss Durand, let me look you squarely in the face again."

Mirabel turned her face squarely to the light and patiently awaited madame's pleasure.

"True Durand—true to the core!" the latter muttered. "I've not mistaken her."

"How would you like to be my heiress, Mirabel Durand?" asked she, still scanning the girl's features. "How would you like to own all of Fairview Glen, and wealth enough besides to buy the souls of half the people in it, and not sell them cheap at that, either?"

"It would be a great change for the persecuted assistant in a daily school, would it not? Preferable to the role of music-teacher as you found it?"

"I've really a mind to do it, Miss Durand. I've a mind to leave it all to you."

Madame paused, peering alternately at them both. Mirabel, taken utterly by surprise, remained silent; while Erne listened in respectful attendance to the madame's will.

"You've nothing to say to it, eh? Just as well, just as well, till you've heard my conditions. You couldn't expect such a patrimony without them, could you?"

Madame never paused for a reply to any of her queries.

"You, Erne Valere," she proceeded, "how would you like to share all the grandeur of such high estate? How would you like to command the rent-rolls it has been your business to collect for me?"

"You make a fine couple standing there together, you two. Both poor and proud, haughty as becomes the heirs of my line, and as honorable, I hope."

"Madame!" ejaculated Erne, a hot flush mantling his cheek.

"Be silent!" commanded madame. "It will be time enough to speak when I am through."

"I have not much longer to live, as perhaps you may have guessed, and I want to leave worthy successors behind me. I don't want you to disappoint my intentions by any foolish scruples."

"I want you, young man, to wed my heiress and assume my name."

"It is in the straight course of nature for every young girl to marry, and I want to put it out of Mirabel Durand's power to throw herself away on a scheming adventurer some day."

"What do you say to my proposition, Erne Valere?"

"Madame, I can only decline it," returned Valere with decision. "Even your wealth could not make amends for the self-respect I would forfeit by such a mercenary marriage, and I would not wrong the lady by entering into such an unloving compact."

Mirabel turned to him, with an eloquent smile illumining her countenance, softening the proud curve of her scarlet lips. She put out her hand to him with an impulsive, graceful motion.

"I thank you from my heart, Mr. Valere. I could no more comply with madame's proposition than could you, and you have released me from the first embarrassment of the refusal."

He inclined his head over the white, delicate hand, and felt a thrill of pleasurable delight in hearing her approbation.

Had not Fay St. Orme woven her fascinations about him he might have defined that thrill as an awakening sensation of something more than simple admiration.

And Mirabel, recognizing the nobility of soul which the young man possessed, and with a woman's appreciation of manly strength and

comeliness noting his perfect proportions, and open, handsome face, did not fail to do honor to madame's judgment.

A link of sympathy was welded in that moment which was the first link of the chain which was hereafter to draw them closer than they could now imagine.

"Ah!" cried madame, "and you would both throw away such a prospect? You are mad—mad, both of you."

"I will not change my conditions, though; think again before the chance is lost."

"I have chosen, madame," said Valere.

"And I," spoke Mirabel, "could never rest as the inheritor of your wealth. Oh, madame, leave it all to the one who has a rightful claim upon it—to the son of Jules Durand."

Madame's eyes flashed a lightning ray, and her right hand clenched itself.

Her lips parted as though an angry torrent would rush forth, but she uttered only a single word.

"Go!"

Mirabel sprang to her side in affright.

"You are ill, madame! The exertion has been too great for you."

"Go!" repeated madame, shrilly.

A rustle like the stirring of the wind among the leaves on the balcony, and Milly Ross slipped away from her hidden position beneath the open window. Noiselessly she glided back to the swinging casement of the anteroom, and stopped with a gasp face to face with Fay St. Orme, who had shrouded herself behind the damask curtain.

At the same moment the bell in madame's room rung a summons.

CHAPTER IX.

MADAME'S DISCOVERY.

THE two eavesdroppers stared silently into each other's faces for a second.

Ross flushed and paled and trembled guiltily; but Miss St. Orme, after her first start of surprise, seemed in no way disconcerted.

"Hush!" she whispered, with her finger on her lips.

Mirabel and Erne were passing out through the anteroom, and the listeners fairly held their breath, lest some slight sound should betray them. Fay turned toward the maid the moment the closing door shut them out, her fair face stamped with a charming expression of innocent wonder.

"Did madame send you out there?" she asked, being careful to modulate her voice that no tone might penetrate to madame's ears. "Why, I thought she had called Miss Durand and Mr. Valere for some secret conference, so I tiptoed through carefully as though it had been a powder-magazine in there. I suppose I was mistaken, or madame would have sent you away out of hearing."

"I didn't want those others to see me, for they might have misconstrued my presence. People are so uncharitable, you know, and so apt to be suspicious without the slightest grounds in the world. That stately Miss Durand might suppose I was trying to overhear what the madame wanted of her, when I was just simply stealing through to get a close view of that exquisite tuberosa, which I could see bursting into blossom over the edge of the balcony. Do you think madame would let me have just one little spray of those half opened buds? They're so lovely, and would be perfectly sweet to loop back my curls when I dress for dinner. What do you think, Ross? I'm sure you have good taste in such things."

"They'd look very nice, I'm sure, miss," returned Ross. "Madame's very particular about her flowers, though, and I couldn't say what her mind might be. Please let me pass, miss; she'll be awful if I keep her waiting."

"Oh, well, don't disturb her with my request, and I'll come myself to see her after I'm dressed. I wish I had you to wait on me instead of that blundering Jean."

Jean was the housekeeper's niece, and quite a rivalry was extant between her and madame's favorite maid. Ross, gratified but nervous, pushed past with a hurried "Thank you, miss," and hastened to the presence of her waiting mistress.

Fay glanced after the prim little figure, and laughed silently.

"A word of flattery fitly spoken," she whispered, in a soliloquy, as she danced lightly out upon the stairway landing, and back through the passage to her own apartment.

"That simple-minded maid is blind to the straight intent of my object, though, at first thought, she was convinced of the fact that I was listening, as I am of her purpose in hiding among the shrubs."

"What has she in view by it, I wonder? Is she planning to make money out of madame's heiress, or does she only wish to discover what legacy is left to herself? I'll keep an eye to your proceedings, you melancholy Ross, and trust me to find if you've any particular purpose at hand."

"Oh, Miss Durand! what an idiotic being you are to throw away the chance madame offered you. Why, I think I would be willing to marry anybody's grandfather, if he were

hideous as the fabled beast, for the sake of coming into such an inheritance. Of course, you weren't to blame that the young man refused you, and I rather imagine that 'I am the cause of it,' if you go to the root of his reasons. Very good taste you have displayed, Mr. Valere, in preferring little me to the queenly Mirabel, but your worldly judgment is decidedly at fault."

"I'm infinitely obliged to you both, though, for your generous self-denial, and your Quixotic views of honor."

"If I've rightly judged the madame, she'll never give you an opportunity for another refusal. What a blessing that she's such an unforgiving old wretch; there's no shadow of fear she'll retract in favor of that cast-off grandson they are all so busy pleading for."

"It will be my time next, for I'm near to the old cat as is Mirabel Durand, but I expected that the matter of the name would give her the preference. Oh, fortune is on my side, surely. Heaven knows to what means I might have had recourse, but now my way simplifies wonderfully."

"Catch me refuse any conditions the madame may impose. If she'd but couple me with that handsome Lucian Ware, and submit the same proposition she gave those other two, she'd never be disappointed by either of us."

"I always did prefer sinners to saints and if Lucian Ware doesn't belong to the first class, I never saw devilry stamped on a perfect face."

"I can imagine what a glorious face it would be, if softened by the pleading of the great, tender passion. But ah! Lucian—Lucian Ware! you are the man to command love, not to implore it. I don't think I could quite give up my ambitious dreams for you, even—"

"Ah, bah! where am I running to? Not to any idle sentiment, be sure. There's too much at stake for that, just yet."

"Now, Fay, you innocent dove, make your hay while the sun shines. Ah! Mirabel Durand! what complications those conscientious scruples of yours have saved me."

"It's as good as settled now that I am madame's heiress, just as I intended to be when I consented to come to this dreary Fairview Glen, with its horrid old manse and its capricious old mistress, its miles upon miles of mountainous lands, and its piles upon piles of golden dollars that madame harvests from it."

And with this reflection prompting her, Fay made a bewitching toilet, and tripped away to the madame's presence with a pale blue silken robe trailing its lengths in midst of the dingy surroundings which fitted the grim old manse. Only a plain band of narrow black velvet encircled her throat, and the white arms were bare of ornament.

All her life Fay had longed for costly jewels to fetter those rounded arms, to circle the pearly neck, and the spark of her strange green-gray eyes rivaled the bright gleam of madame's diamonds, as she thought of those priceless gems one day becoming her own.

She stopped on the threshold of madame's room, startled, and staring as though she saw some uncanny sight.

There sat madame in a great arm-chair, with a dress of crimson-and-gold brocade falling in stiff voluminous folds to the floor. She wore a glittering stomacher, and the rare yellow lace at her throat was clasped by a single immense ruby, which burned like a concentrated flame in the light of the declining sun.

A little stand drawn to her elbow, held a couple of jeweled caskets, one of them open, with a portion of its contents strewn about.

Milly Ross and the housekeeper, Briggs, were in close attendance upon madame, their faces reflecting dire dismay.

Madame's passion of the afternoon had resulted in this—a very opposite effect from that predicted by Doctor Gaines. Madame's indomitable will seemed slowly to be overcoming the resistance of the stricken powers.

By dint of threat and command, she had made herself obeyed. Through the combined efforts of Ross and the housekeeper, she had been lifted from her couch and arrayed in full dress, and sat now in the great arm-chair, as has been seen.

Her restless black eyes caught sight of Fay, as the latter paused in the doorway.

"There, Babyface, go away before you fall into a hysteria from fright again. You're a victim to nerves. I detest nerves; I'll not have people that are troubled with them about me. I'll not have an exhibition of them; do you hear, Miss St. Orme?"

"Oh, madame dear! please do let me come in," cried Fay, coaxingly. "Indeed—indeed, I'll be very careful not to disturb you. I'm so glad to find you so wonderfully better; it is a very great joyful surprise. Oh, please let me stay."

"Oh, but you'll be going into hysteria from excessive joy next," cried the madame, grimly.

"No, no, indeed! I never have hysteria, except from some very great shock or terror. You shall tell me if I annoy you in any way."

"Well, come in then," said madame, growing gracious. "Turn about, Miss Vanity, until I

view that becoming toilet you've been spending hours upon, I dare say. It's not complete, Miss St. Orme; where are your ornaments?"

"I was meaning to beg some of those lovely tuberoses of yours. I have no jewels, madame; not even of the simplest kind. Mamma and I were so dreadfully poor, you know."

"Oh, dreadfully poor, no doubt," assented madame. "Pray, how many silk dresses may your wardrobe contain?"

"Let me think," murmured Fay, reflectively. "I have a lovely sea-green satin and a puffed white lace over-dress with it, that's my best; then, I've a white moire shot with gold, from last season; my rose *glace* and this blue; a gray foulard made from one of mamma's; and some common blacks and browns, but they are horribly shabby."

"You're to be pitied, Miss St. Orme," said madame, gravely. "I really don't see how you contrived to exist with that meager supply. I suppose you have some other dresses?"

"Oh, yes; India muslin, and cambries and organdies, a silk tissue, and two common prints. I've a tarlatan that I once wore over maize satin—that might do here, though I never could have worn it again at my uncle's. I've some of Japanese goods, too, and summer silks—"

"And no jewels?" broke in madame. "Pitiable case! I hope your uncle never put you on short rations?"

"What?" asked Fay, opening her eyes with a sudden comprehension that madame's grave sympathy was covert sarcasm.

"You had enough to eat?"

"Of course. You're laughing at me, Madame Durand; but, indeed, my wardrobe is nothing, compared with my cousins'. I'm glad I have all those dresses, madame, for they will last me a long time here."

"Of course," assented the madame.

"Now, my dear madame," coaxed Fay, "may Ross bring me the flowers I asked for, and may I look at your jewels? Oh, what beauties!"

"No, Ross may not break so much as a single stem," said madame, positively. "I can't prevent you looking at those gewgaws if you wish to, since they are plainly in view. Here, Milly Ross, open the other casket for me; empty it in my lap—so."

With a cry of delight Fay went down upon her knees before the madame.

"They've not seen the light for twenty-five years," said madame, in croaking monotone. "Not for twenty-five years, until to-day. And they are bright and mocking now as when I shut them away."

"No, I'll not despoil my rose-tree to set off your babyface beauty, Miss St. Orme. Here's something that will please you better, and the Durand jewels will never miss it."

Madame lifted a slender gold chain with an emerald clasp, in her feeble hand. Fay's eyes had contracted to narrow green points, whose gleam was concentrated on the glittering heap which shone against the background of madame's rich brocade.

She drew her gaze away with a wistful sigh, as she accepted the old woman's gift.

"So very, very kind of you, dear Madame Durand. Oh, it's lovely; but see, it does not match my dress. I can't wear an emerald with blue, you know."

"Put it on," said madame, peremptorily, "it matches your eyes. They're green—green as were Rosalie Durand's. There's a bracelet, too—ah! here. Clasp it on Miss St. Orme's wrist, Ross."

Fay extended her hand, and Milly Ross snapped a glittering coil upon the smooth, white arm. It was a serpent with quivering, golden scales, and emerald eyes that caught a baleful light from the late sunshine streaming into the room.

"Oh, how deliciously horrid," cried Fay, as she delightfully surveyed her new acquisition. "Oh, you dear Madame Durand! how can I ever thank you enough?"

A grim smile settled down upon the madame's face.

"Fit to be a descendant of Rosalie Durand," she muttered, *sotto voce*. "Cold-blooded, I perceive; treacherous, I know."

"I'm tired of you, Miss St. Orme," said she, changing her mood abruptly. "You can go contentedly, for I'll give you nothing more now. Put the jewels all away, Ross. Ah! what's that?"

Madame was passing her hand slowly through the glittering heap, and had lifted a gold ring, which seemed solid, but barbaric in its heavy breadth. Her wavering touch must have come into contact with some hidden spring, for the apparently solid band fell suddenly apart, disclosing an inner ring, the existence of which she had never known.

The concealed ring was a band of delicate gold tracery, studded closely all the way around with tiny alternate amethysts and pearls.

"Odd!" said madame. "Of all the Durand jewels, many as they are, this is the only piece I have never worn. Put it on my finger, Ross; I've taken a fancy to this mysterious ring."

And Ross obediently slipped the circlet on madame's finger, then replaced the jewels, and locked them fast in the strong-bound caskets.

CHAPTER X. A COMPACT.

A MAN whose figure was ill-defined in the deep shadow, leaned against the wall of the old round tower.

It was ten o'clock at night, and the moon was up in full silvery radiance; but there was cumbersome foliage at the foot of the tower, deep abutments too, and the moss-grown remnant of a crumbling wall, that shut the flood of light completely away, from the spot where the man stood waiting.

Not patiently waiting, it would seem, though his head was drooping, and his mind intently at work. He changed his position with irritable frequency, or paced back and forth by the side of the ruined wall.

He advanced a few steps to listen, and a ray of moonlight revealed the face of the young law-student, Lucian Ware.

At the same instant the prim little figure of madame's maid came to view from the corner of the mansion, and approached noiselessly to his side.

"At last," said Lucian Ware, holding out his hand. "I almost despaired of your coming. I've been waiting half-an-hour, Milly."

He spoke in a tone of plaintive reproach, and held her thin little hand close in his grasp.

Ah, Milly Ross! Then *this* is the secret of your spying upon the madame—the eavesdropping beneath the window. That was a part which your own simple honesty of itself would never have assumed, but the subtle power of handsome Lucian Ware has blinded you to the fact that you are only a cat's-paw in his hands, and you are lending yourself a tool to his machinations, fancying that you are to be rewarded by his love. Ah, simple Milly Ross! you have yet to learn that the love of Lucian Ware is a bane that is to cast a blight on more than you alone.

"It is just then," replied the maid. "But, oh Mr. Lucian, I had given up the hope of coming to-night. I feared I should have to disappoint you."

"Disappoint me!" he echoed. "I'd not have slept a wink this night. But now tell me, have you found out anything?"

"I've done precisely as you wished me to do, Mr. Lucian. I've kept a watch on them all, and now you shall hear every thing which I have learned."

Thereupon Ross entered into the minutest details of all that had occurred at the manse after his departure on the preceding evening. The relation embraced madame's conviction that she had been warned of her inevitable fate by the specter of hapless Rosalie Durand; all that transpired during her interview with the lawyer; the private audience with Miss Durand and the young agent, Valere, with every circumstance pertaining to it; and at last, madame's freak of the afternoon for which her passion had given her strength, and the favor into which she had suddenly taken Fay St. Orme.

"The doctor came at six," said Ross, nearing her conclusion, "and you never saw a man so took aback. He says he can't understand at all how madame escaped her death, in consequence of her imprudence; and when she told him of her warning, blustered out of her sight to declare that she couldn't have an enemy determined to take her life with greater chance to succeed than her own rashness promised now."

"He ordered her to bed, but madame refused to go, and laughed in his face at his fears for her. I believe she would have made him help carry her in her great chair down to dinner, but he got in such a rage about her not obeying his orders that she was afraid he might put arsenic in her tea."

"She sat in state till after the clock passed the stroke of nine before ever she would consent to be undressed again. Briggs staid to sit with her then, after she'd been put to bed, while I came out to get rid of the headache I'd got from the fright when I supposed Miss St. Orme had found me out. It's lucky she didn't suspect but the madame had sent me there."

Milly Ross, naturally shrewd in many ways, was unsophisticated with all, and Fay's semblance of perfect innocence had misled her completely, as the young lady intended it should. The mind of Lucian Ware had compassed a truer understanding, but he had no thought of undeceiving his companion.

"I must hurry back or the madame will be vexed again, though all her anger now seems to do her a world of good. She'll be well in a week, if she keeps going in such rages and mends as fast as she's done to-day."

"It'll not be much of a blessing to you—the capricious old termagant!" said Ware.

"Oh, but the madame's been kind to me in her way!" cried Ross. "She's full of whims, and odd, and hard to please sometimes, but I wouldn't for the world that any harm should happen her. I'd be glad to see her up strong and well again."

"Oh, you're a forgiving little mortal," retorted Ware, lightly. "Now I hate the madame for her arrogance, and for her supercilious patronage. In any one else I'd rather admire her invincible will, and her total lack of senti-

mental feeling; but in her it always rouses my aggressive spirit. What, going, little one?"

"Yes, I must go," answered Ross, but still lingered.

"Oh, not for a moment," said Lucian, dropping his hand caressingly upon her shoulder. "I've more work for you still, faithful little mouse. Must I ask if you are willing?"

"I hope it's not to play the spy again," hesitated Ross, timidly deprecating. "Any thing else—oh! you know I must do any thing that's not a sin that you might ask of me, Lucian."

"But, anticipating the knowledge which I must have in a short time all the same is not a sin, you conscientious little Puritan; you should know that I'd never ask any thing positively wrong of you. Yes, I do want you to spy upon madame, but for only this one time. I want you to watch when the lawyer comes to draw up her will to-morrow, and discover, if you can, who she makes her heir. There'll be legacies, of course; you will have one, and I don't see why I shouldn't be remembered, too. You'll be sure to find it all out for me, Milly?"

With a half-regretful sigh, Ross promised, for she could refuse him nothing.

"I knew you would," he said, taking her hands in his strong pressure. "One kiss, sweet; there, good-night!"

So much tenderness was more than he had often given her; the young law-student was fastidious to an extreme, and the plain, grave little face of Milly Ross had no single charm for him, hypocrite and dissembler that he was. But she, thrilling with the delight of his caress, and ready now to do his bidding without questioning, gliding silently back by the way she had come.

Ware folded his arms and still remained standing in the shadow of the tower, lost in deep reflection.

"It's plain enough that madame will leave every thing to Miss St. Orme," he thought, in soliloquy. "She declared it her intention to make one of these young girls her heiress, and beautiful Mirabel has angered her beyond all hopes of future favor."

"The little St. Orme is on the look-out for her own prospects, too. No such innocent pretext as satisfied Ross drew her into hiding behind that dingy curtain."

"And the warning which has frightened the madame so, I think, if truly solved, would reveal the little schemer *en costume* according to the portrait of Rosalie Durand. She must have got hold of the superstition and madame's belief in the verity of the apparition, and is working out some plan of her own without a doubt."

"All very well, clever little Fay, but I wish it had been the queenly Mirabel instead. It is madame's heiress I have it in my mind to win, and if you are destined to bear that distinction you are the full worthy mate for Lucian Ware!"

He broke from his reverie, and turned away from the neighborhood of the grim old tower. Unhesitatingly he trod the curving path which led away from the north facade to the side-gate opening on the rugged footpath which was the shortest route to the village. At this late hour he had little fear of encountering any of madame's retainers, or in that case could readily account for his presence.

Before he reached the last turn in the path, the gate clanged, and some one advancing at a rapid swinging gait faced Lucian in another moment.

"North!" said the latter in recognition. "What's the row now—anything new in the crotchets of the boss?"

"You'd do well to stay at hand to study his mind yourself, Mr. Lucian," answered Mr. Thancroft's clerk. "I've enough to busy me at my desk without meddling where I'm in no way concerned. By the way, there's Scranton's writ to be made out yet to-night; Mr. Thancroft ordered it and the copying that's back to be taken to your room with instructions to have them ready when we open to-morrow. I hope you'll be prepared with the writ, for it's important."

"Then I won't, if it's any satisfaction for you to know it. I wouldn't do drudgery to-night if it was for the Governor of the State. I say, where are you going so late?"

"To the manse with a packet of instructions for Mr. Valere. I've been detained."

"See here, North," said Lucian persuasively. "I'll promise to do your errand faithfully enough, if you'll attend to those law-papers instead."

North hesitated.

"You're so uncertain, Mr. Lucian."

"Oh, then, maybe I'll mend," returned Ware, gayly, knowing that he had carried his point.

"The packet, North!"

Rather reluctantly North placed it in his hands, and turned on his solitary way back to the village.

"A good enough fellow," muttered Lucian, "but too straight-laced by far, and with a private pick at me since he fancies I am making love to his sweetheart. Patience, patience, good North! You'll be welcome to your pale-faced Ross after her work of to-morrow."

With quick steps he retraced his way up the gravelled walk to the front of the manse.

The great entrance-door stood wide, and the gray-haired butler sat in a hall-chair just within it. To him Lucian delivered the packet.

"You're late," said he, lounging against the piazza-railing. "I feared I'd find you all shut up."

"I'm only waiting for it, sir," replied the butler, grumblingly. "It's from bringing giddy young misses here that'll upset us all. It's clear the madame wasn't sound when she did it; this awful thing has been working with her for a long time, I misdoubt."

"The young ladies have not retired?" interrogated Ware.

"One of them has but just come in from Lord knows where—moon-gazing, I reckon. She's there yet, and it's her I'm waiting for."

The old man nodded his head in the direction of the glass door opening into the parlor, and Lucian perceived a glimmer of light through the curtain which shrouded it within.

Crossing the piazza, he tapped lightly, and straightway entered the presence of Fay St. Orme.

"Mr. Ware," she said, with a start, and a perceptible brightening of color.

Lucian bowed, and his keen glance made note that her slippers were soaked and her silken robe dragged with the summer-night's dew.

He was sure, then, that she had been a witness to his meeting with Ross.

"You make a good spy, Miss St. Orme," said he, smilingly; "but I am a better General. What do you say to winning the day by a union of forces?"

"Agreed," said Fay, unhesitatingly, extending her hand as a seal to the compact.

For a second these two plotters dropped their habitual masks, and read through each other's eyes the reckless depravity of moral natures prepared to brave any consequence in gratifying the ambitious vanity which swayed them both.

CHAPTER XI.

A SUBTLE SUGGESTION.

MADAME was closeted with her lawyer at the time appointed on the following morning.

There were writing materials on the little table, and beside it Mr. Thancroft occupied a straight-backed chair awaiting madame's pleasure to begin his task.

"What would you think, my friend," she queried, "of a penniless girl who as good as refuses to accept the position of my heiress? Who would have believed such foolhardy self-sacrifice could exist in our age? What do you say to the course which Mirabel Durand has taken, my good friend?"

"I honor her for it," cried the lawyer, warmly. "Ah, madame, she has the true nobility of you Durands, and if it were not for the true heir there is not another one I would as gladly see come into possession of Fairview Glen."

"Ah!" aspirated madame. "No one asks for your wish, you exasperating man. I'll not have you force your opinions on me, I say."

"There are but two of all those who can present the shadow of a claim upon me to whom I would willingly leave the estate of the Durands; and of these, one has put away the chance. No, no, Mr. Thancroft; Mirabel Durand shall not inherit it now."

The lawyer bowed with an anxious air, but controlled the impatience he was beginning to feel.

"The pride of Mirabel Durand does not require these wide acres to back it," continued madame, with her odd, chuckling laugh. "Her independence shall not be hampered by the farms and goods and chattels I shall leave behind me. Hist! What is that?"

The vine which trained over the window near her was agitated, and the leaves rustled though there was no breeze upon that sultry morning.

Milly Ross, fancying herself secure in her hiding-place, upon the balcony, had moved incautiously in her intense eagerness to catch every one of the madame's words.

Moving stealthily, Mr. Thancroft approached the open casement and leaned suddenly out, with one hand brushing back the screen of leaves which impeded his view.

There was no chance of escape for the offending maid. Ross crouched low in the midst of the greenery, shrinking in a horror of mortification and dismay, and burying her face, which was stained crimson with the shame of this discovery, in her thin, trembling hands.

"You?" cried the lawyer, in accents of surprise. "I would never have thought it."

"Who, who, who?" demanded madame, in the excitement of impatience and anger.

"Come," said Mr. Thancroft, stepping over the low sill to Milly's side, and clutching her not very gently by the shoulder. "Come and answer to your mistress for the motive of your eavesdropping. Come, I say."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Milly, in an agony of shame and remorse. "Oh, please, no!"

"Who is it?" called madame, sharply. "Who is it that would play the spy about me? Not Ross?"

But Ross it was, almost sinking with the

mortification of her detection, whom the lawyer arraigned before the eye of her mistress.

"Is there not one faithful?" asked madame, bitterly. "You, Milly Ross, to turn against me! You unable to wait the little time which must elapse, that you must listen to discover if you are mentioned in my will?"

"I tell you now that I'll leave not a penny to you," continued madame, her first reproach waxing into rage. "There should have been five hundred dollars each to you, and Briggs, and Jean, but not a penny to you now, I say."

"There, go, and let Jean answer when I ring."

Ross slunk away with a sullen look upon her face. Madame could have put no greater slight or punishment upon her than by thus readily giving Jean the preference. To make matters worse, Mr. Thancroft who followed her to the door of the outer room, called to the housemaid who chanced to be loitering on the stairway.

"Stay within call, Jean; madame will have you wait upon her for the present."

He disappeared, and the girl turned to Ross with impertinent curiosity.

"Why, what's up? Has the madame got offended with her favorite? I'd ha' thought you'd have managed better just now."

"Madame 'll not be any the better for the change, mark that!" said Ross, with her pale eyes gleaming in her pale face. She only meant that no other could satisfactorily supersede her in attendance upon her mistress, but Jean interpreted her in another way.

"Oh, if it's making threats that you are, maybe I'd better be telling her at once. They do say the madame has seen her warning."

But Ross passed on without deigning a reply.

And in the room where she had received her sentence of disgrace, the lawyer sat at the little table driving his quill over the parchment spread before him as he followed madame's dictation.

More than once the flexible nib hesitated or came to a full stop, and the warm-hearted little man would raise his head in deprecation and entreaty.

"Oh, not everything, madame," he cried, as she proclaimed one of her sentences. "Oh, surely you must have some single tithe of natural affection. Is there not one single impulse will plead with me for Jules's boy?"

Something like a smile flitted over madame's face, but left it gray and hard as before.

"Write," she commanded, not heeding his interruption, and word for word repeated the clause as she had given it at first.

So the will was drawn in due form and signed by madame's feeble hand in presence of the butler and the housekeeper, whose signatures as witnesses were afterward affixed.

It was folded, sealed, and taken in charge by the lawyer, who afterward stalked away from the manse with a gloomy dissatisfaction plainly evinced in his manner.

He encountered the two young ladies strolling together in the maze of twisting paths which intersected madame's parterre; and Miss Durand stopped him with a gracious yet withal imperious nod of greeting.

"I was hoping to see you, Mr. Thancroft," said she, extending her hand frankly. "I want you to take my version of the wretched business which has so bitterly angered madame."

"I have heard it all," he replied, taking the little hand as though it were some fragile thing which he feared would break. "You were nobly unselfish, Miss Durand; but madame is hard as steel, and pitiless as the sphinx."

"I hope she has not made her will in my favor," said Mirabel, gravely—"I hope she has not committed that grave injustice against her own true heir."

"She has not made you heiress of her wealth, Miss Durand," said the lawyer, gloomily. "Ah, Heaven! it were better if she had."

He turned away with a hasty gesture of leaving-taking.

"How provoking!" cried Fay, with a little pout. "Why couldn't he tell us who *does* come in for it all?"

"That would be to violate madame's confidence," responded Mirabel, calmly. "I trust the renewal of her health may leave us in ignorance for a long time to come."

In her own mind Fay was convinced that *she* was the fortunate legatee.

Near sunset that evening, Lucian Ware strolled by a roundabout course up from the village through the mountainous forest land, to the verge where it met with the orchards, and there he met Miss St. Orme.

She stood apparently wrapped in contemplating the beauties of the rugged scenery, which stretched before her downward to the brawling little creek with ragged pine clumps edging it. Her head, surrounded by the golden halo of floating tresses, was serenely poised, and her attitude was that of unconscious forgetfulness and charming abandon.

Ware paused with an appreciative eye for the effect, but a scornful smile just moved the curve of his lip, and brought a shadow lurking at the corner of his mouth.

"Very good, Miss St. Orme," he applauded,

mentally. "The pose is excellent, that unconscious expression natural to the life, and as a whole you form a charming addition to the scene. But for all of your seeming absorption, I'd be willing to wager one of the precious years of my life that you have been perfectly cognizant of my approach. I have read you too clearly, Miss St. Orme, to be blinded by your clever little arts."

Nevertheless, he advanced and accosted her according to the spirit she had shown.

"Am I an intruder unawares, Miss St. Orme? Now, don't tell me that you had forgotten our tryst, and that this is but a chance meeting after all. I was tempted to think it, by your utter unconcern."

"Only forgotten for the moment, Mr. Ware. I'm so heedless, though, it would not be strange if I did forget. Thank me for keeping it in mind through the pleasant nature of my news. I couldn't forbear coming to receive your congratulations."

"Madame has been gracious enough to leave you her largest—perhaps her sole heiress, then, I take it. You'll be the richest lady in the State at that rate."

"Ah, and won't I loose the strings of the musty old money-bags madame has hoarded so long! First, I'll astonish the natives of this primitive Fairview Glen, and then I'll go back to the world where I properly belong, and reign it royally enough over all my devotees; revenge myself, too, on those that have had the countenance to snub me on account of my poverty and dependence. It's a very pleasing prospect to me, I assure you, Mr. Lucian Ware."

Lucian sighed, and met her glance with a dejected, sorrowful smile.

"I congratulate you on your certain fortune, with all my heart," said he; "but it grieves me to see you so anxious to resume your broken sway out in the heartless world. I wish some tie could bind your anticipations to the Glen, unpromising as it must have seemed at first."

"What tie?" asked Fay, softly, with drooping lids, and pink flushes wavering over her cheeks. "Dare I tell you, sweet Fay? Dare I speak to madame's heiress the words with which I would gladly woo penniless Miss St. Orme? It would be too great presumption on the part of the impecunious law-student."

"You forget our compact," said Fay. "We were to work in unison, you know."

"And does that mean the reward shall be mutually shared? I did not dare to make that a provision then, and now it must appear to you in the worst of taste to declare the mad thoughts that are possessing me. Ah, Fay, bewildering little sprite, it is all due to your wondrous loveliness."

That was the manner in which Lucian Ware's specious tongue uttered it; but the truth was that he had been too cautious to commit himself until quite sure of the golden prize he was planning to possess.

"Have my hopes misled me, Fay, or is it true I may even win you, peerless one?"

Coquette that she was, she had no thought of resorting to her accustomed tantalizing devices now. The first genuine heart-emotion she had ever felt had come to her through Lucian Ware; and, alas! it was not an influence which might by any means ennoble her, or seek to lead her selfish, perverted nature toward a better channel. But the sway was powerful over her, sweet beyond mere word expression; and now her eagerness to secure this handsome lover would not permit her to dally idly, as she had done before this, with the hearts of honest, true men.

"No hope of yours need lack fulfillment," she answered, softly, and for the space of a moment there was silence between them.

Then Lucian Ware uttered vows and protestations, until he had forged and riveted the chain of sworn betrothal between them two. And all the time—dissembler that he was—his heart was thrilling with intense longing with the remembrance of beautiful Mirabel, while his lips were dropping utterances of love for this fair Circe.

Fay, chameleon-like in her changes, went suddenly back to the subject of the will.

"Now that it is made," said she, "madame may insist on living her century out."

Lucian Ware bent his head until the shadow obscured his face, and his eyes furtively studied his companion's expression.

"Why should not madame's warning be followed by the result?" he asked. "She would not be the first Durand who has died from poison, if traditions are true!"

CHAPTER XII.

WAS IT MADAME'S FATE?

"Why should not madame meet with the Fate?" said Lucian, with slow significance.

"Ah, you frighten me, speaking of such a terrible happening," Fay exclaimed, shudderingly. But Ware, with his eyes steadily reading her face, saw that she had not misunderstood him, and that under her shivering aversion, not at all feigned, was all of the subtle deceit and hardihood he had expected to find there.

"Come, let us be candid with each other," said he, drawing her hand within his arm, and speaking in cautious, suppressed tones, as they began to pace back and forth slowly beneath the shadow of the orchard trees. "Confess that if you were driven now to choose between madame's wealth and me, you would never hesitate in wrecking these sweet dreams we have been reveling in. I have no mind to chide you for it, sweet! for while I should have loved you just the same as the dependent relative, I am more rejoiced to win the heiress of all Fairview as my future bride.

"This longing for wealth and power has been born and bred in both of us, and it is that mutual sympathy which has drawn us together. Do you think now you could bear to be disappointed in the hopes you have reared?"

Fay's eyes flashed back his glance with a hard and greenish gleam. It was a peculiarity of those strange, beryl-tinted orbs, to narrow and scintillate with a cruel green glitter when any selfish passion swayed her.

"I hate death and I fear it," she said, in tones so tense they seemed almost choking her. "I dread the awful solemnity of it and the frightful mystery; but, rather than give up these hopes I have cherished, I could watch madame struggle at its approach, suffer tortures—torments—agonies, and never quiver or feel anything but joy over the change that should leave everything to me."

"Madame has lived her allotted time in the natural course of events, but she has vitality enough to stand her for a score of years yet. She is so full of whimsical caprices, too, that she may alter her will any day, and on the very slightest provocation."

"Ah!" aspirated Fay, "she shall not, I say. Go on, Lucian Ware! I am not going to shrink from whatever you may have to suggest."

Instead of replying, Ware went into a somber study, from which Fay roused him presently.

"See how the shadows are lengthening," she said. "I must go back and pay court to madame before dinner is served. I have been dressing for her benefit, if it pleases you to perceive."

She dropped his arm, and, flitting a few paces away, turned herself deliberately that he might view every point of her attire, then making him a courtesy of mock humiliation, awaited his comments.

She wore the sea-green satin this afternoon. Its trained skirt was looped with waved gold cable-cord, and her over-dress, very much puffed, was of sheer white lawn, with elaborately embroidered edge. She wore the ornaments madame had given her upon her throat and arms, and she had chosen this toilet because it suited them so admirably.

"And madame is sufficiently a connoisseur in matter of dress to admit your perfect taste," said Lucian. "You could not fail to please me, little sprite, whatever you might wear."

Fay laughed in pretty, triumphant glee.

Ah, the deception of appearance! One would think no guile could lurk beneath the fair exterior of that lovely face, nor lay concealed under the naive, child-like manner.

Yet she had not even dismissed the dark prompting which was stirring in her heart.

She turned to Ware and dropped her voice to a cadence less piercing than an ordinary whisper.

"Oh, I hope the madame will die," she uttered in that suppressed tone and in a rapid, breathless way. "I wish that she may not live through another night. I wish that the Fate may smite her down, rather than she should disappoint me in my inheritance."

"Have you nothing to say to me, Lucian?"

In her eagerness she was anticipating him, and he hesitated in his reply.

"I have formed no plans—my thought and my speech were instantaneous, indeed. We must make ourselves secure, whatever may transpire, you know."

"I am burning with impatience," Fay interrupted him. "I am fearful; I seem to have a prescience of ill hovering near us—you and me. I can't bear the idea of the time dragging on in this uncertain way."

"You are nervously fanciful," said Lucian, with an extenuating smile. "No ill shall come to us, my Fay. I must have time to think first, and then I shall come to see you at the manse. You may look for me before the evening is quite over."

Then followed the little endearments peculiar to the partings of acknowledged lovers, forced on his part but earnestly meant by her. Then Ware turned back to ruminate darkly as he trod the forest path, where the shadows had gathered in unbroken density.

Another scene where love pleaded honestly and truly was transpiring meanwhile in another section of the manse grounds.

Milly Ross loitered out near the side-gate, generally used by pedestrian comers, watching in the vain expectation of encountering Lucian Ware.

She knew that Valere was waiting a response to some message he had forwarded to the law-office, and she believed that Ware would seize the opportunity to visit the manse.

But, instead, came North to transact the business, whatever it might have been. Breaking through the gate in the hurried manner which was habitual with him, he came suddenly upon the disgraced maid and then gave her no chance to retreat, as she gladly would have done.

With a couple of long, swinging strides he reached her side, and dropped his arm down about the prim little figure.

"You shall not run away from me, Milly. I've not seen the chance to have a word with you for a week now. You weren't used to be so shy, lass."

"Well, you've grown bold to make good the difference," said Ross, pertly; but she nervously fingered the hem of her snowy kerchief.

"Haven't you some wish or cheer for me, Milly? I've been somehow downhearted missing the sight of you, and I've been hard-worked, too, for a time, though I don't say it in the way to complain."

"Well, what do you do it for?" queried the maid, almost sharply. "There's no sense in it as I can see, drudging as you do, and none but yourself in the world to be cared for."

"Don't say that, lass; you know why I'm working so to get a start ahead, now. I'm doing well, too, Milly; full well as I've any reason to expect. I've been looking at a little martin-box down in the village, and I'm hoping to have the nest feathered by Christmas-time."

"I've brought you this, dear. I wouldn't get it till I saw some certainty of coming through all right."

He drew a slender little ring from his vest-pocket, like a twisted thread of gold, with a cornelian heart set in the top.

"I'll get you a plain one for a wedding ring before long. Let me see if it's right, my darling; you know they say:

"When love will fit without a measure,
Happy hearts make household treasure."

But Ross drew away from him with an impatient jerk.

"I'm sure I don't want your ring, Henry North. I don't see why you should pester me with your plans when I'm not caring for your affairs. Goodness knows, I've got trouble enough without being tagged after by you."

The honest fellow's face clouded over.

"I didn't mean to trouble you, Milly. I hoped you would be glad with me at the prospect of the little home we've talked of before now. You haven't been so anxious to see me of late, but I knew the reason of it and kept thinking your own good judgment would show you the right way."

"A handsome young gentleman like Lucian Ware isn't apt to mean much by his love-making, lass. It's natural you should be flattered, though certainly you couldn't help seeing that it's only his way of amusing himself."

"That's all you know, I suppose," said Ross, angrily. "That's your way of judging your betters, Henry North. You'd like me to coop myself up in your narrow martin-box, and because I don't fly at your offer, you must rail out against them that maybe are earnest as you."

"You're being blinded if you're trusting anything to Mr. Lucian," persisted North. "He'll not bring you any happiness, Milly; I wish you would believe me."

"It's no concern of yours, then. I'm willing to abide by my own sense, I'm sure."

North returned the ring to his pocket with a sigh.

"It'll wait for you, Milly," he said, gently. "You'll know which is the honest love by-and-by. I'd like to save you from the pain of being cast off by Mr. Lucian, though; it's sure to come to that at last."

"Maybe I have better evidence," said Ross, boastfully, won to complete faith by that caress which Lucian had bestowed upon her.

"You don't understand the ways of handsome young men like him," said North, moodily. "If I thought he meant any harm to you, by Heaven! I'd never wait—"

Milly stopped him with an angry gesture.

"What do you take me for!" she asked. "I'll not have you casting slurs at either him or me. You'll be good enough to keep out of the way of meddling, after this."

"I'll not vex you, at least," he replied, sorrowfully. "Only mind this, Milly: I'll be working ahead all the same, getting ready for you some day."

"The more fool you, then!" cried Ross, angrily. "It'll be a long wait you'll have, I'm thinking."

She sped away from him then, before he could answer, had he so wished; and North, recalled to his duty, went forward to the manse.

Madame Durand was less alert as the evening drew on than she had been through the day. A feeling of oppressive languor was settling down over her which she struggled vainly to resist. Fay tripped into her presence, all soft solicitude, pouring out an effusion of anxious inquiries.

"You charming old madame, it's so naughty of you to excite yourself as you've been doing. Of course you're quite tired out now. Don't I know what it is to be wound up to such a pitch, and then to go down all at once!"

"I do wish you'd let me do something. It's too late to read to you, I suppose, and I can't sing any more than an owl. I'm a useless little mortal, I know; but I do want you to care for me, dear Madame Durand."

"Mayn't I stay up here to have my dinner with you, instead of dining in state with the others below?"

Madame was grimly gracious, but excused herself positively enough from Miss St. Orme's attendance. So Fay went away again with many softly-uttered wishes for madame's bettered condition on the morrow.

Out in the queer little anteroom the setting sun was sending his last rays through the dingy red curtain. Fay half paused with a sudden shiver as she caught sight of her hand, which was a vivid crimson where the reflected light fell upon it.

"It looked like blood," she murmured to herself. "I wonder if I should feel remorse if it really were? I have thought sometimes that, if a life stood in my way, it would never cause me either a qualm or a pang to remove it."

She moved on as she heard a slight rustle without, and passed Mirabel on the landing.

The latter had come to make inquiry for the madame, and finding no one in waiting, went directly to the old lady's side.

"Ah, well, what do you want?" asked the madame, impatiently arousing. "I wish to be left quite undisturbed now. Ring the bell for Jean, will you?"

"In a moment, madame. Let me wait upon you this once, will you not? I would like to feel that you are not seriously vexed on account of our interview yesterday."

Mirabel spoke wistfully, with a yearning of pity and tenderness in her young heart for this forlorn old woman, who had bereft herself of all close ties which might have been comfort and solace to her now.

But madame seemed impervious to softer feeling.

"It was your privilege," said she, grimly. "Must I repeat that I want to be left undisturbed? I'll take a nap, I think."

"Let me watch by you, then," pleaded Mirabel, with gentle persistency.

"No. Ring for Jean. Don't wait, Miss Durand!"

"Good-night, then," and as she passed by madame's chair, Mirabel stooped to press her lips lightly upon the wrinkled forehead.

As it chanced, Jean was not at hand, and Ross, who was within hearing, went—not without an apprehensive tremor—to answer the summons.

She need not have trembled, for madame had fallen into an apathy which was unobservant of her surroundings.

"Hand me the liniment, Jean," said she, drowsily, not observing that it was Ross beside her. "That's all now."

Milly Ross poured the liniment into a little china basin and placed it within her mistress's reach, and, after a moment, retired softly that she might not be disturbed.

Madame dipped her right hand into the little basin, and with it, wearily chafed the left.

"How dead and numb they feel," she said to herself, "and how strangely I am feeling. Chilling and burning—how strange!"

"Oh, the will! Yes, yes!" She was wandering vaguely. "Was it right, I wonder? I wouldn't repent at the last, you see, and they'll never know—"

"It's my digestion that's wrong, that's it. 'A good digestion, and no heart'—a good motto, ha! ha! I'll take blue mass; that'll right me."

And madame muttered on that she was being consumed with raging thirst, but the water was all ice—all ice. It was freezing in her parched mouth; ah, now she was growing chill and cold. So was she, poor, self-deluded madame.

This was no counterfeit of death, this stark and rigid form sitting erect in the great arm-chair. There was no bright spark of light in the wide-open, glazing eyes, now.

Was this madame's Fate?

CHAPTER XIII.

A MYSTERIOUS CONSULTATION.

DEAD!

Gone on the dark, mysterious journey, without any kindred love to smooth the dim pass which leads from time into eternity.

There were shadows in the room, but the light from the open west window was lingering about the figure so awfully rigid and motionless, invested now with a terror which was greater than the awe madame had been wont to command in those about her.

Briggs came in presently with a lighted taper in her hand, and an humble apology for the slight delay of madame's dinner service, with which the butler was at that moment following.

She advanced to the branching candelabrum with its supply of fresh waxen tapers, and lifted her hand to set them aflame.

But, with a howl of affright, she staggered back, and then, gaining breath, uttered shriek after shriek of mortal terror.

She had met the open stare of those glazing eyes, faced the pallid, set features with the awe,

some seal upon them, reflected down from a small inclined mirror upon the wall.

She flung her black silk apron over her head to shut out the sight, stifling her screams in its close folds as she rushed precipitately out, and astonished the staid old butler by fairly throwing her arms about him in the dim anteroom, while she screamed and shrieked inarticulately: "Oh, it's the madame!—oh! it's the madame! gone clean dead!" she shrieked, distinguishably at last.

The butler shook off her clinging arms at that, and hurried forward, only to verify the assertion.

And in two minutes more the manse rung with the dread proclamation:

"Madame is dead!"

The effect ran like an electric current through the household. The scene of confusion which would otherwise inevitably have ensued was speedily checked by the young land-agent, who was happily at hand.

Messengers were dispatched in all haste to the village; the objectless excitement which prevailed among the servants was quelled by a few explanatory sentences; the housekeeper was brought to her senses by a sharp rebuke and a hastily administered dose of strong brandy and water, and then Valere sprang up the spiral stairway and stood within madame's room.

Mirabel was already there, very pale, but quite calm, and Ross, in an agony of terror, was on her knees, chafing the clammy hands that would never again be warmed by the pulsing life-blood.

"She is quite dead, I think," said Miss Durand. "It is her third attack, they say."

Erne took a little hand-mirror from a stand close by and held it to the pallid lips. The polished surface remained undimmed.

"All is over," he said, with sorrowful quietness. "Ah, poor Madame Durand!"

They stood silently by the still form. These two generous young hearts sincerely mourned the eccentric old woman, whose arid life had been so suddenly blotted out.

Erne spoke presently.

"Come away, Miss Durand. This is no place for you now."

Even then Briggs appeared in the doorway, accompanied by an elderly woman from the village, whose duty it was to prepare the dead for burial. Doctor Gaines came in at almost the same moment, but after the briefest examination turned away from madame's chair with a sorrowful shake of the head.

Mirabel took Erne's arm, and they passed out together.

Shrinking in the outer doorway, with eyes widely distended and cheeks flushed with hectic flame, stood Fay.

"What is it?" she asked, in an excited whisper. "What does it all mean? Has any thing happened to the madame?"

Valere explained gently as he could, but half-recoiled—appalled by the green flame which leaped into those great intense eyes. It seemed to him like a fire of exultation, and a thrill of revulsed feeling chilled him.

She held something concealed in her clenched hand, and, as she turned away without a word, slipped it with a stealthy motion into her bosom. It looked like a tiny gold tube with a glittering star attached.

Mirabel had seen neither that nor the swift flash of those intense green eyes. She followed on in the direction Fay had taken, fearful that the latter might be overtaken again by a hysterical attack.

Valere went below, and out into the fragrant twilight of the court. It was still and cool there, but above he could see the shadows as they came and went on the blinds of that upper room which held the dread visitant of death.

Even with these reminders before him his thoughts were not with departed madame. He leaned against the trunk of a sturdy oleander tree, baring his head that the cool summer breeze might play about his throbbing temples.

A mystic train of thought was aroused within him, and every nerve was strained to a quiver as he concentrated his mind to follow its dim course.

Point by point it all came out before him like the growing picture from a magic lens.

He saw himself a little ragged, neglected child in a squalid room, which was dark and forbidding to his baby sense. He sat upon a rude settee, with a little, dark stained-wood casket beside him. The casket had grown familiar enough to him since, but to the child in the pictured scene it was a new, wonderful delight.

The busy little fingers were fumbling with the lock, and the lid flew open under their manipulations. There was a cushioned crimson satin lining, and on this lay a tiny dark vial, closed partially in by a gold tube, which had a sparkling crystal stopper.

Was it that he had seen in its swift transition from Fay's hand to-night?

The pictured remembrance was too vivid yet to let him dwell upon the possibility.

Still following that strange mental tracery, he seemed to see a child seize upon the pretty

toy with a delighted cry, and fondle it in the little claw-like hands, all unused to such gleaming objects.

Then he saw a harsh face—the face of a woman—appear above the boy, wearing an expression which was demoniacal while she watched him for a moment without offering to despoil him of the treasure. But, suddenly her face changed as though a storm was convulsing it. With a sudden cry, she snatched the vial in its golden casing violently away, but tossed him the empty casket to quiet the griefed cry of the little disappointed heart.

There the vivid gleam of remembrance was suddenly blotted into utter darkness. If that one scene from his early childhood possessed any significance, or any resulting connection with the occurrences of this night, Erne was powerless to follow the thread.

On the morrow early came Mr. Thancroft. He explained that he had been absent from the village on the preceding evening, not returning till past midnight. He spoke a few words to Valere, and the young man conducted him into the library, where madame's business papers and accounts were kept.

Gravely and quietly he examined them, putting his seal upon such documents as seemed of importance.

"I am to wait for Gaines," Mr. Thancroft explained, as they came together out of the library, and he paused to lock the door. "He had patients to attend, but it's quite time he was here. Madame was quite alone at the last, he says."

"Yes; it is all very sad."

"Ah, ah!" sighed the lawyer.

Something seemed weighing upon his mind, he was so nervously abstracted, but it might have been grief for his eccentric old friend.

Doctor Gaines soon afterward appeared, and together the lawyer and physician went into the quiet chamber where the still form was lying.

"Now," said Mr. Thancroft, in that subdued tone which the presence of death always commands, "of what did madame die?"

The doctor looked at him wonderingly.

"What should she die of but the expected trouble? It was her third stroke, you know, and I always said she wouldn't survive it. Brought on by overexertion and excitement as I predicted."

"You're sure it's not poison?"

"Good Lord, no! You don't put any faith in that superstitious fancy, I hope?"

"Scarcely that; but I gave Madame Durand my promise to make the closest investigations after her death."

"She went naturally enough," said the doctor, positively.

"But that doesn't release me, Gaines. You've not made any examination since?"

"It didn't seem necessary."

"I want you to do it now—very closely, indeed."

"I'll do it to oblige you, Thancroft," answered the doctor. "But I'm confident of the result."

He crossed the room to turn the key in the door, then returned to stoop over the corpse.

The examination lasted not longer than ten minutes.

"There are no outward traces of anything of a poisonous nature," he announced. "The death was purely natural."

Mr. Thancroft fidgeted.

"I wish you'd make a post-mortem," said he. "There's no certainty without."

"Yes, push ourselves forward into publicity, and be both laughed at and censured for our pains. I wash my hands of it entirely. You've heard my opinion, and I'm quite willing to take out a certificate to that effect, but I would not go further if I were even less firmly convinced of its being a clear case."

Mr. Thancroft did not urge the matter then, but straightway rode down the mountain-side and sent a telegram to the learned professor of a medical college in Philadelphia. This same professor had once been an inseparable chum of his own, and a warm regard existed between them, now that they were on the sere side of life. The wording of the dispatch was urgent, and brought the professor on the first outward-bound train.

The days were creeping by heavy-winged at the manse. There was the solemn stillness, broken by the muffled tread of those who came and went, weighing oppressively upon the spirits of the household.

The fourth day was at hand—the one which had been set apart for the funeral. And during the morning there was another mysterious consultation in the death-chamber.

The learned professor was shut in there with the lawyer and Doctor Gaines, the latter with some difficulty being persuaded to join them. The watchers and underlings were banished to another portion of the building, and for four hours no sound was heard from the closed room.

Then the three came out together, and had an acute observer been at hand, he might have noted in their faces:

First, the learned professor was perplexed and a little disconcerted,

Secondly, Doctor Gaines was dumfounded, wide of any reckoning, but obstinately determined to maintain his asserted grounds.

Thirdly, Mr. Thancroft was grim, and determined, and stern, as he had never been seen before.

Then soon the hour came when the mourning procession formed—when Madame Durand, in her sealed lead coffin, inclosed in its ebony casket, was borne reverently out and laid to rest in the deep vault beneath the tower, where those of her family from the time of fair Rosalie Durand were reposing.

And the third day after the funeral a little assembly was collected in the reception-room at the manse, summoned there to hear the reading of madame's will.

CHAPTER XIV.

MADAME'S WILL.

THE two young ladies, Miss Durand and Miss St. Orme, occupied chairs near the open front windows. Lucian Ware had taken his place by the side of Fay, while Valere stood a little apart, with his arm resting upon the back of the vacant great chair, which had not been removed from its accustomed place.

The servants in their new mourning attire, were grouped at the opposite end of the room.

Mr. Thancroft sat by a little laize-covered table which had been brought from the library, and North stood at his back, ready to accommodate himself to the bidding of his employer.

The lawyer consulted his watch and pushed back his chair. At the same moment Doctor Gaines appeared in the doorway, and, with a low bow of general recognition, seated himself in the chair North placed for him.

Then Mr. Thancroft, placing his hand upon the sealed document on the table, looked about him.

"This," said he, "is the hour appointed for the reading of the will, and all legatees being now present, I proceed to break the seals."

He unfolded the rustling parchment and passed it to North, who cleared his throat and began to read.

"THE SOLE WILL AND TESTAMENT
OF LUCILLE DURAND.
Fairview Manse, 1869."

"I, Lucille Durand, considering the uncertainty of this mortal existence, moreover, having been warned by Providence that the time of my dissolution is near, and being of sound mind and memory, declare this to be my last Will and Testament."

"To Abel Johnston, the aged butler, who has been in my employ for upward of forty years, in consideration of his faithful services and in token of my kind regard, I bequeath the sum of one thousand dollars, to be paid to him in due time by the executors of this, my Will."

"To my housekeeper, Elizabeth Briggs, and likewise to Jean Briggs, her niece, I bequeath the sum of five hundred dollars each, to be paid in manner aforesaid."

"The sum of five hundred dollars which I had intended for my waiting-maid, Mildred Ross—but withheld from her for reasons she will fully understand—I bequeath instead to Henry North, whom I regard as a highly reputable, deserving and trustworthy young man."

This bequest was a complete surprise to the clerk, who had not expected the remembrance, and his voice wavered slightly in sympathy with the chagrin of Milly Ross. He went on amid the decorous silence which was maintained.

"To Lucian Ware, I bequeath the moiety of five hundred dollars per annum, to be paid to him for five years succeeding my demise, on condition that he concludes his course of study under the supervision of my friend and lawyer, Albert Thancroft. It is my hope that by the expiration of this time, he may have attained such proficiency in the profession as to work his way unaided in the world."

"To my young relative, Fay St. Orme, I bequeath five hundred dollars per annum, for such time as she may remain unmarried."

"The whole of my personal property, estate, houses and moneys, as held by me and in my name (except as otherwise disposed of), I bequeath to the young man known as Erne Valere, and who now occupies the humble position of my collecting agent and private secretary, on the following conditions:

"First, That he shall within a year and a day take to be his wife, my young relative, Mirabel Durand."

"Secondly, That until the day of his marriage with Mirabel Durand, or otherwise until the full expiration of the year and day hereby designated, he shall faithfully perform all the duties of his present situation."

"Thirdly, That he shall, upon taking possession of the inheritance, assume and be thereafter known by the name of Valliers Durand."

"Should Erne Valere fail to marry Mirabel Durand within the time stipulated, all my property, lands, houses and moneys, as before mentioned, I direct to be devoted to the cause of charity, as hereinafter specified."

Here followed explicit directions for such compliance.

"I bequeath to Mirabel Durand, in token of my approbation of her unselfish conduct, without condition or limit whatever, the sum of thirty thousand dollars; and also all of the Durand jewels contained in the two large, steel-bound caskets in my possession; all of which to be enjoyed by her, and her natural heirs, forever."

"I impose no restriction, but earnestly remind her that it is my dearest wish for her to wed with Erne Valere, the more especially as he will be left penniless if he consents and she refuses to comply with these conditions."

"I appoint and declare Albert Thancroft, who has always proved a sincere and devoted friend, and, at his suggestion, Calvin Gaines, M. D., as joint executors of this, my Will. I adjure them to see the conditions I have named faithfully complied with, bequeathing to them, as an earnest of friendship and good-will, the sum of five thousand dollars each."

"In witness whereof, I set my hand and seal, this twenty-third day of June, in the year of our Lord Eighteen Hundred and Sixty-nine."

"Signed, LUCILLE DURAND."

"Witnessed by { ALBERT THANCROFT,
ABEL JOHNSTON,
ELIZABETH BRIGGS."

The clerk laid down the will upon the little baize-colored table again, and with a bow retired to a less prominent position in the room.

Mr. Thancroft rose and addressed those present.

"It was the wish of Madame Durand that the marriage proposed between Mr. Valere and Miss Durand should not be formally considered within three months of this date. She refrained from making that a condition of the will in view of such immediate contingency as possibly might arise."

"That is all, I believe."

The stillness which had prevailed among the listeners was broken now. Fay St. Orme broke into a succession of hysterical sobs and shrieks, and threw herself prone upon the floor in a paroxysm of disappointed rage which was terrible to behold.

She gnashed her small teeth and tore her beautiful fair hair with savage hands. She glared at those about her with baleful glance, and screamed and struggled in a manner that promised violent injury to herself.

There was no affectation about her hysteria on this occasion.

It required the combined efforts of Dr. Gaines and Valere to raise her from the floor and bear her to a couch.

Erne turned away then with a sickening sensation at heart, but thankful that the scales had fallen from his eyes.

He saw Fay St. Orme clearly now, in all the moral deformity of her selfish, scheming and mercenary nature. A feeling of disgust rose within him, that he should have loved, ever so slightly, any thing so contemptibly frail. Never again could the fair-faced siren, in her most enchanting guise, wring more than pity from his honest soul.

Ware had never stirred to offer his assistance, but as the assembled party broke up, he took his hat and went out alone.

Down over the twisting walks trod he, over the stream of sunshine which lay brightly golden on the strip of lawn, and passing the gateway strode away down the rocky declivity in an opposite direction from the village.

On and on and on, keeping within the darkest shadows of the pine woods, until he had exhausted the inward fever which had impelled him to rapid motion. Then he threw himself down in the very depths of the darkest nook and held gloomy self-communion.

His face, which in the perfect outline and symmetry of beauty might have been godlike, was devilish in its malignity of expression. The tempest of an evil soul racked to its depths was raging within him.

"Oh, fool, fool, fool!" he hissed, between his clenched teeth. "Was it for *this* that I have plotted and waited? Was it for *this* that I have borne insult and exasperating patronage? Was it for *this* I smothered my promptings of hate and retaliation, and smiled and cringed to the old she devil's pleasure?"

"Oh, curse you—curse you in your grave, Madame Durand!"

The wild fury of the man was something awful to contemplate, all the more so for the firm curb he held over the intense strength of his passions. Except for that hissing whisper, for his labored respiration, and the dull grinding of his clenched teeth, he was immovable and silent, as if carved from stone. His wrath was like the deep smoldering of a volcanic fire, which if broken loose would sweep all things before it, and leave a waste of black desolation in its track.

Hours passed, and he never moved. The passion-stained lines of his face never quivered nor softened. The surge of his tempest-tossed soul upheaved with continuous force.

Then all at once came the revulsion of feeling which must always follow such an extreme of mental excitation. The tense muscles relaxed; the steely gleam of the bright blue eyes was quenched out from the darkening, shadowy depths, the entire form drooped suddenly, as if divested of its strength.

He buried his face in the mossy sod of the secluded spot where he lay, but still not a cry nor a tremor escaped him. The great secret of this man's powerful influence over other minds, might have found one explanation in the fact that even when most distraught, he was still master of himself.

The sun was creeping slowly on its declining course. A ray penetrated the leafy covert and fell in a ruddy gleam upon the prostrate man.

He stirred and muttered impatiently. Was it the thread of sunshine so affecting him?

A second later he sprang to his feet with flushing cheeks, and defiant rearing of his statue-like head. He had heard no sound, but the subtle magnetism of another presence had impressed itself on his senses.

A woman was standing within a few paces, quite motionless, impassively regarding him. A woman of strange aspect, of commanding mien, but with a weird, mysterious seeming which would at once fascinate and repel.

She was tall beyond the average height of women; her head was firmly poised, and was crowned by an immense coil of soft, bright hair, roped with the silvered frost of advancing years; her gray dress, both coarse and scant, hung in folds about an attenuated figure, which in proud bearing could have matched with that of any sceptered queen.

Her face was worn and furrowed as much by the contest of intense and bitter passion as by speeding years. It was a harsh, unyielding face, with pride stamped upon it, and the cold severity of despotic conviction. Her eyes were blue, steely, glittering.

To look into their depths, and note the accurate, firmly-poised head, brought an indefinite but nevertheless recognized similarity to mind between this woman and Lucian Ware. It might have been that some strong personal resemblance had marked them once, but if so, time had ravaged from her all the beauty which was so pre-eminently distinct with him.

They gazed at each other silently for a moment.

"What have you come for—to mock me?" he asked, angrily. "This was a glorious aim for my ambition. Ah! worthy is the end for the sacrifice. I was a fool ever to have listened to your prating."

"I've been waiting to hear the end," said the woman, with an upspringing flame changing her cold eyes into lurid caverns. "What is the end—tell me?"

Ware's laugh rung out in mocking cadence.

"Bah! A confession I never thought to make. I've awakened to a sense that I can feel something more than longing for power, station, wealth! *That* is the end!"

"But the will—the will. What was the nature of the will?"

It was some moments before she could elicit any statement from Ware, who seemed possessed with a purposely wayward mood. When at last she gathered the drift of it, she clasped her gaunt white hands tightly upon her heart, and fixing him with her scared eyes, she muttered inarticulately to herself.

Ware shook off the incubus of her blank gaze, and waxed angrily vehement.

"Ay, stare and mutter; you'll not mend matters now. You fostered my ambition and nourished it with false hopes; you instilled the seeds of bitterness and unbelief into me, and nursed them to their rankest growth; they found congenial soil, no doubt; you led me on from the bad that was in me by nature to the worse that I know myself now to be. I never blamed you for it—I never wished it otherwise—until now. I took a kind of supreme delight in knowing my own exaggerated traits."

"But now—now I have awakened to the knowledge that I am a man with a man's heart, swayed by a man's passion."

"Not such an end as I dreamed of. Would you believe it, I would willingly scatter every wild dream of coming state and power, for the certainty of winning peerless Mirabel Durand!"

"Oh, miserere, miserere!" the woman uttered, in wailing monotone.

"Ay, chant over your defeat—bury your hopes, whatever they were," mocked Ware. "My misery isn't courting companionship."

He turned abruptly away, strode over a little space of flecked light and shade, and then was lost to view.

The woman stood still, with her gaunt white hands locked close together. The last sound of his receding footsteps died away, and then a great tenderness, you would never have imagined it capable of, stole down upon the woman's face, and tears that seemed wrung from the very endurance of suffering, welled into her cavernous eyes.

CHAPTER XV.

A TERRIBLE ACCUSATION.

THE night express from Philadelphia dropped two passengers at Fairview station, which was situated a full mile and a half from the village proper.

There was a mail-wagon morning and evening driven out to meet the appropriate trains, but at nine P. M. no conveyance was at hand in the vicinity of the little isolated station-house. This much the two passengers ascertained, and consulting together, determined to walk the distance up the rugged road to the village.

"Deuced awkward to leave our luggage behind," said one, in a drawling, indolent tone. "One never finds accommodations in these country taverns, and I don't fancy being jumbled up indiscriminately with all sorts of people we're likely to meet. You'll be sure to send the trunk ahead in the morning?"

"Sure," promised the land-agent. "The

gentlemen should find them at the Fairview House by ten at the latest. Were they intending to stay long in the village?"

"That depends," answered the one who seemed to have constituted himself spokesman. "Any trout in the streams?"

"Plenty of 'em. Good accommodations, too, considering the difficulties of the situation. Young gentlemen from the city often come out here for a few weeks in the summer-time; but the place isn't stylish enough for the young ladies, bless their hearts! Not but we have some of our own in the section round about, though," added the voluble station-agent.

"We'll not trouble them, then," answered the passenger, with a laugh. "Truth to tell, we dropped down into these wilds to get out of the way of crinoline, for a time. Come, Drake, let's be moving, or we'll have to knock up the establishment, and I'm ravenous now. Suppose we carry our valises."

Taking the light leather traveling-bags, and leaving two trunks to be sent after them, the late passengers took the road to the village. The first was young, and clad in a style rather pronounced, such as might pertain to a city clerk determined to create a sensation during the holidays. The man called Drake was of middle age, quieter in dress and of a manner reserved if not taciturn. He had the look of a respectable bookkeeper or bank employe.

The landlord of the Fairview House chanced to be entertaining some late guests, and a supper was served the newly-arrived travelers with less delay than might have been apprehended. While they were still at table, North dropped in and stood conversing with the clerk behind the bar.

"Have something?" asked the latter.

"A glass of your home brewed. I'm not in the habit of indulging in stimulants, you know."

"Not to celebrate your good fortune?" asked the landlord, coming up at that moment and slapping him on the back familiarly. "Come, come, North! It's seldom enough we see you here; stand treat for the occasion, I say."

By this time the two men had quit the supper-table and joined the group in the outer room. North turned toward the bartender.

"Take the orders of the party," said he. "Cigars, for me, please."

Drake also chose cigars when his turn came around. North only waited to pay the reckoning, and was passing down the steps of the hotel porch when he was accosted by the elder traveler.

"A light, if you please. Ah, thank you. Is this your way? No intrusion to keep you company for a little way, I hope; I always smoke in the open air."

"Oh, no intrusion," North assured him. "But I stop just beyond here."

"Been coming into a fortune?" queried the stranger.

"Only a legacy—not large—five hundred dollars," explained the clerk, briefly. He was not so gratified with the bequest as he might have been had not the amount come to him over the head of the woman he loved, and was chary of alluding to the matter.

Drake made no further remark, however. He puffed contemplatively at his cigar until his companion paused with his hand upon the gate before Mr. Thancroft's dwelling.

"We part company here, I suppose?" said the clerk. "Good-night to you, sir!"

"Not quite," the other answered, with quiet assurance. "Show me in to Mr. Thancroft. It's not necessary to announce me."

North stared.

"Can't you wait until office hours?" he asked. "I don't like to disturb my employer."

"He'll not count it a disturbance," answered Drake. "Besides, he's expecting me. Which way, and I'll not trouble you."

North swung open the house door, and struck a light in the long, narrow hall.

"The second door to the left, straight ahead," he said, holding the candle aloft to throw its flickering gleam upon the way.

At the same moment the door opened from within, and framed the lawyer in the glow from the large astral lamp which put to shame the wavering candle rays.

"You are punctual," said he, standing aside to let his late visitor pass; and then nodded his dismissal to North.

The door closed again, and the clerk took his way up a narrow flight of stairs in the rear of the hall to his single apartment above. He had grown singularly grave in the last moment or two. That long consultation over the dead body of Madame Durand, had not been kept private as the participants in it could have wished, and the surmises freely bandied about assisted him to arrive at the true nature of the business which had brought a visitor at this unusual hour, in this apparently preconcerted manner.

"Heaven grant nothing may come of it," he muttered, to himself, uneasily. "I don't know why I should fear any thing even at the worst, but if there's been foul play there'll be foul work before it's unmasked. I can't help wishing that some one but me had brought that man here."

One who had not fathomed his thoughts might have fancied North grown suddenly not at all. The stay of the visitor below was limited; and in the days that succeeded, he and his companion strictly followed the programme that was expected of them—trouting and gunning with indifferent success; making some casual acquaintances about the village, smoking, drinking pale ale, and discussing neighborhood gossip with the landlord of the Fairview House, who was favorably inclined toward these well-ordered lodgers.

And at the manse there had been little change since the gloom attendant upon the late sorrowful occasion had settled over the household. The badges of mourning were worn by all its members; but further than that, and the void left by the absence of the familiar mistress—a void which to those who had long been accustomed to the grotesque little figure; the sharp sound of the ebony stick ringing at intervals through the paved corridors; the keen eyes that kept close surveillance over the whole domain, and the imperious will of the madame, could not readily be filled.

A maiden sister of Dr. Gaines had taken up her abode at the manse, in the capacity of companion to the young ladies, and as a conciliator to Mrs. Grundy, who is ever on the look-out for any breach of social etiquette.

A week had passed since the reading of the will, and Lucian Ware had not since made his appearance at the manse. Fay, recovered now from the first bitterness of her disappointment, though by no means reconciled to her meager apportionment, felt his absence with a growing sense of indignation and resentment. She was impatient for the sympathy which she considered was her just claim from him, and nervously restless until she should receive assurance of his faith, which she had too much belief in her own witching fascinations to doubt—although she was not madame's heiress.

But a week after the reading of the will, Ware came up from the office, ostensibly to carry some message to Valere; to take observations, and gain certain information regarding facts that were of vital import to him.

This week, during which he had held himself aloof from them all, had been one of bitter strife, wearing desires, maddening, passion-inspired impulses, held this far in check by that tense will which had never yielded to any mastering power until Mirabel Durand all unconsciously filled his intense—albeit cruelly selfish—capacity for idolatrous worship.

Now his spirit was panting within him for a glimpse of her; he would have sacrificed much of worldly interest to only touch her hand and hear words of passing kindness fall from her lips; he would have risked his chances for this world and the next, to have poured out the strong fervor of his love, and pleaded, as only his specious tongue could plead, for a meet return, with but the slightest hope of success.

But, he could quell the wild tumult which rose within him; he could come up through the grounds to the manse, treading where she might recently have walked, drinking in the fragrance of the flowers which, now that the madame was no more, she had made her especial care, occupy the room where she might recently have sat, and yet command the impulse which would have urged him to seek her presence and wreck his fondest hopes by a premature burst of passionate appeal.

He could be patient, crafty, calculating.

So he sent up no message to Mirabel Durand except as included in his respects to "the ladies," but scribbled a few words upon a card to be delivered to Miss St. Orme.

He went alone into the silent parlor to await her coming, and a moment later she glided in, with a soft radiance touching her face.

Ware stood before a window, passive and cold, looking worn and haggard.

"Ah, dilatory lover!" she said, reproachfully, crossing to his side.

He let her hand rest passively upon his palm, then bowed and relinquished it.

"Whatever else Miss St. Orme may number in the catalogue of her faults, dilatory action is not one of them. You were prompt—very prompt, Miss St. Orme; and how little you were profited, after all."

Fay regarded him strangely, but with a soft smile gradually dimpling about her pouting lips, beaming even in its burden of tender solicitude.

"My poor Lucian! My dear boy, how wretchedly you are looking. How that miserable business has told upon you—how you must have worried over it all. See how like a Spartan heroine I have borne the test, though I nearly died of disappointment just at first. We can afford to wait, Lucian."

He dropped his face over her with bitter, sneering scrutiny, but Fay smiled back at him with apparent frank innocence.

Ware broke into a discordant laugh.

"Ha, ha! what an innocent dove you are, fair Fay! How sweetly you coo, and how unflinchingly you have passed the ordeal! Who would ever suspect you of possessing venomous claws?"

She pouted her pretty lips like a spoiled child.

"Now, you are trying to be provoking. I'll not have you picking a quarrel with me, do you hear, Mr. Lucian?"

Ware stood up with folded arms and darkened face.

"Pray, drop the mask, Miss St. Orme. This hy-play might be made amusing, but time is limited with me. You did your work well, I repeat."

"Then it's something new in my experience," Fay retorted, airily. "Explain yourself if it is of sufficient consequence. I'm sure I don't know what you're aiming at. First, place me a chair, please; no, not that horrid concern; it would crush all the flounces of my new crape mourning dress."

Ware saw her seated, and withdrew a couple of paces.

"I confess to being outdone," he said. "I could not carry myself so bravely."

"Do be agreeable, Lucian. You've not uttered a single pretty sentiment since I came down. If you're wondering why I'm not in tears and pale with sorrow on account of the madame, candidly, between you and I, it's simply because she failed being munificent enough to pay me for the trouble."

Lucian looked at her, almost in doubt.

"You got the vial?" he asked.

"The little one with the gold tube?—oh, yes." Fay shivered a little, and the mellow light of her wonderful eyes changed to glittering green points. "How fortunate there was no need of it!"

"Bah!" cried Lucian Ware, in mocking disbelief. "Deceive all the world as you see fit, but don't try to blind me. It was a sorry reward, wasn't it, for staining that fair little hand with so foul a crime as—poisoning?"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COMPACT BROKEN.

"You are wrong," cried Fay, with angry impatience. "I never did it, I say—there was no need. If there had been—if madame had been sure of living a score of years without—I never could have done it. I knew that when I was put to the test."

"Tell it to the winds," mocked Ware.

"It is the truth, Lucian, believe me. When the woman you sent came out of the shrubbery that night and beckoned to me as I stood alone by my sitting-room window, I crept out stealthily to meet her as she seemed to wish. I had no idea of what her object might be, and never thought that she had come from you until her own words told me so."

"She drew the vial from her bosom, saying as she did so, in a hurried whispering way:

"There, take that! One drop from the vial filtered through the tube will bring madame's fate upon her. Don't be afraid—I come from Lucian, and it is his will has given you this to do."

"She thrust the vial into my hand, and moved away silently as if she had been a ghost. I was taken by surprise, and had no time to question her, had I been disposed. I loitered out there in the shrubbery for a little while, facing the temptation which you had put before me. I was reckless and daring enough, but with the means to accomplish such a deed, I felt that I never could take away madame's life."

"If I had hated her, I might have continued to feel all that I said to you when I was excited and angered at the thought that our plans might be baffled as they have been since. But I had no cause to hate Madame Durand. I did hope that she might die, for I thought then I would be mistress of all Fairview, but I could not do her harm, even for that."

"It had grown quite dusk when I went in, and—I found the confusion which stunned and rejoiced me at once when they told me that she was dead. Dead without any aid of mine, I swear to you, Lucian."

He looked down upon her sneeringly, unbelieving still. Himself an adept in deceptive arts, unhesitating, remorseless, and reading her more shallow selfish nature by his own, he thought this only a cleverly-acted subterfuge to cover the hideousness of guilt, which will strike some horror to even those who do not shrink from the stain of it.

"What a tragedienne you would make!" said he. "Do you stay on here at the manse, Miss St. Orme?"

"Yes, of course, for a year and a day; and even then I fancy the proud mistress of the place will scarcely turn me away."

"Lucian!"

He had ground out an oath between his set teeth as her words brought before him a vision of Mirabel queening it there—the stately mistress of Fairview, the sweet bride of his rival.

"As Heaven hears me, never!"

"What is it, Lucian? You frighten me."

Fay put up her hands to clasp his arm timidly. Oh, the power of love, that could so transform the coquette who had never known a generous emotion, or felt a thrill of sympathy for the victims of her pretty wiles! Was this retribution coming home to her?

Ware shook her clinging hands roughly off.

"For Heaven's sake, be gone in such foot-

and lost. We are done with each other—you and I."

"Lucian, Lucian! You never mean that. You could not be so heartlessly cruel. The knowledge of your love makes me bear my (w) disappointment more calmly, and enables me to look ahead over our probationary term to a humbler state than I could before this have contemplated. We must wait for a time, you know, for my paltry pittance will stop when I marry; but I have planned out the future in a very different way since I saw you last."

"When Valere has once fulfilled the conditions of madame's will, you can easily secure the position he now holds. I am sure that he and Mirabel will prove generous enough to give you a handsome salary which shall be adequate to our wants."

Fay fairly shrunk under the burning fire of his glance.

"You are slow to comprehend," he said, with scornful contempt. "The marriage of convenience we contemplated is quite a breath of the past—there's no more of it. Affairs have changed all that, you see."

"Do you mean that it was only madame's wealth you wooed me for, or are you sacrificing heart-promptings to ambition now?"

Breathlessly she awaited his answer. It came, derisive, cutting, cruel in its undisguised disdain.

"I might have married you had it all turned out as we expected, although I am not even sure of that now. If it had come so, my only allurement would have been Fairview and its host of outlying farms. My heart and soul could have owed allegiance then as now to only one—and that one never you, Miss St. Orme."

"Who?" she demanded, so quietly that he was deceived by her assumed calmness.

"Who should it be but incomparable Mirabel Durand?"

"Oh, happy Mirabel!" said Fay, in that same quiet way. "And will she for the second time renounce the Durand estates, cheat the heir of madame's choosing of the inheritance, and with her thirty thousand dollars, her casket of priceless jewels and her proud beauty, condescend to bless the poor student of a miserable little country lawyer? Will Valere and Fairview have no influence with her, think you?"

"She shall never marry him, never, never!" said Ware, turning pale with the strength of his suppressed passion. "I shall not fail to win her yet, peerless Mirabel!"

"Oh, peerless Mirabel!" cried Fay, in panting mockery, unable longer to repress her pent-up passion. "But the other day it was—'Lovely Fay! Irresistible Fay!' You see, your words were sweet enough to make me cherish them. How you loved me—in protest! What sacrifices you would make were I 'only penniless Miss St. Orme!' no condition could alter you or cause you to waver in truth to me! But a little more than a week ago, and now—"

"Oh, man, man! what stuff do you suppose we are made of that you could treat any woman so?"

"Pray do not indulge in heroics, Miss St. Orme; scenes are always detestable," observed Lucian, coldly.

Fay turned to face him, her small, graceful figure quivering with angry agitation, her face colorless, her eyes scintillating their baneful green glitter.

She raised her little white hand, clenched until the blood seemed ready to burst from the delicate finger-nails, and her voice came hoarse and strange beyond recognition.

"Hear me, Lucian Ware! You shall never wed with Mirabel Durand. I swear it, surely as there is a Heaven above us. You have subjected me to the bitterest humiliation a woman can know. You raised in me the power of a passion, which can be strong, alike in love or hate. You have treated me with contempt; you have scorned the love that would have induced me to face a life of poverty with you; you have put another woman before me, and pictured her as immaculate, throwing the darker shade of contrast over me. And yet I love you, I love you still, Lucian Ware; but I hate Mirabel Durand with all the intensity of my soul."

"You put power in my hands when you caused me to receive that little gold-tubed vial with its deadly contents. I would never have used it on poor old Madame Durand, but I warn you, if you care for the safety of lovely Mirabel, tempt me no further than you have done this day."

"Sooner than see you wed with her, my hand should send you both down to perdition."

He laughed with incredulous disdain.

"Ah, that would be too perilous. I never doubt that you would strike in the dark if you could, but never where the consequences would inevitably recoil upon your own fair head."

"And now that you remind me of it, you may find it safest to return that vial. It may prove a tell-tale thing some day."

"Give it to you?—oh, no! I must have some weapon to combat those schemes of yours, and none more effective than the pretty toy you were free enough to intrust with me."

And with that Miss St. Orme dashed out of his sight, to speed away in some swift char-

ber, and double-locking the door, threw herself upon the bed and gave scope to the overpowering passion which possessed her, in her usual uncontrollable way.

Left alone, Lucian Ware leaned over the back of a heavy old chair, lost in gloomy meditation.

"Would she dare?" he asked himself. "What will not a woman dare in a frenzy of love, and fierce, vindictive hate? I must find some means to get the vial away from her; but how?—that is the question. She will not give it up willingly to any one now."

No light came into his moody face as he reflected. He took up his hat at last and was passing out, when he saw Milly Ross in the court, a pair of large scissors in her hand, with which she was trimming the sere leaves from the various shrubs. He called to her as he stood in the open door, and she came at once, a little flush tinging the face which was even thinner and paler than its usual wont.

"You've been a long time gone, for you, Mr. Lucian," she said, quietly. "You're not looking well, either, sir. I think there's trouble come to all of us through the loss of the madame."

"A grievous disappointment to you, Milly."

"I didn't deserve any thing better, and I'm not grieving over having nothing left to me. But I do regret having lost the confidence of my mistress just at the last, being unworthy of it, I mean."

She spoke in a dreary way, which told how it had been weighing upon her mind.

"Well, that's all past now! I must ask you to do me a favor, Milly."

He paused a moment to concoct some plausible pretext for the part he wished her to perform. An idea occurred to him almost immediately.

"I have just permitted myself, through lack of forethought, to part with a very powerful sedative drug, which I must regain in some way, Milly. Miss St. Orme, whom I chanced to meet in here, was complaining of nervousness and unrest; I gave her the vial, very thoughtlessly, for I fancy she is not the proper sort of person to be intrusted with any thing of that nature. I have remembered since that Doctor Gaines would not prescribe morphia in her hysterical attack, and this mixture contains a large proportion of opium. I have used it myself a few times, but not often on that account."

"Now, I wish you to watch your chance and secrete the vial without the young lady's knowledge. Doctor Gaines tells me she is threatened with some form of monomania, which quiet indulgence may avert; so it may be best not to agitate her by explaining the deleterious nature of the drug I so thoughtlessly placed in her hands."

"You can not make any mistake; the vial is very small, fitted into a gold tube with a crystal stopper. If you can get it out of sight, Miss St. Orme may never think of it again."

"It is yours, you say?" questioned Milly Ross.

"Yes. I will come to meet you, to-night, or to-morrow night at furthest, at our old trysting-place. You'll bring it to me there, and be very careful, Milly?"

"As you say, Mr. Lucian."

He had not calculated amiss in his supposition of Fay's careless habits. Ross was waiting-maid to the two young ladies now, and that same afternoon, when she went to dress Miss St. Orme for the late dinner, she discovered the gold-tubed vial in one of the young lady's toilet-boxes.

She dropped it unobserved into the pocket of her mourning dress, but some subtle fascination it seemed to possess caused her to take it out and study it curiously as she turned it about in her hand on the first occasion when she found herself quite alone.

She had gone into the reception-room to close it for the day. It had been one of madame's customs to have this apartment punctually closed at five in the afternoon, and Ross still scrupulously performed the duty.

A shadow darkened one of the windows, and thrusting the vial nervously back into its concealment, she glanced up apprehensively. A man, dressed in common laborer's clothes, with a florid complexion and flaming red hair, was crossing the piazza toward the entrance-door.

With a relieved sigh, Milly turned to the completion of her task.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOLLOWING A CLEW.

THE man explained that he had been sent in place of the gardener who came two days in every week to keep the grounds in repair. His name was Blair, and he had received his instructions from the gardener, who was suffering from an attack of rheumatism. It was late in the day, but if he could clear the vegetable beds before dusk, he thought to-morrow would suffice to put the flowers and walks into order.

Jean conducted him out to the plot of kitchen garden, where she was going with a great china

bowl in her hand to gather late strawberries for dessert.

"It's not much that's to be done," said the girl. "The air is sort of bleak up here, and the old madame generally had the vegetables growed down at the village. 'Peared as though she never could find place enough for her flowering plants, let alone cumbering the ground with kitchen truck. Been along with Cranston much afore this?"

No, he was a stranger in the village and only took up the job for a day or two. Wasn't much used to the work and didn't know as he would like, but if he was employed *there* and in such pleasant company, he'd be a'most willing to go into a contract and serve faithfully as Jacob did for seven years, if another seven weren't to be tacked to the end of 'em and he was sure of the reward he'd be thinking of asking for.

"Oh, Lor," said Jean, simpering. "Seven year aren't nothing to stay in a good place. Folks often go longer without the promise of more than they honestly earn, at that. There's Mr. Johnston has lived at the manse for over forty year, and I was brought up in the service as you might say."

Blair had heard the talk down at the village as how the madame had left a little remembrance to all of them in her employ; very generous of her, some said, but for his part he didn't see as she could have put it to any better use. Some folks paid that sort of conscience-money for not being considerate as they might have been while they were alive.

"Oh, madame was always good enough, for that matter; she had odd turns and was awful set, but she never put upon us as she did on them as came nearer to being of her own sort. We might be the worse off for her loss, only that Miss Mirabel's to be the mistress."

Madame must have been very fond of Mirabel to have left her the estate, Blair suggested.

"Oh, it wasn't left to her, but to Mr. Valere, on condition that he should marry Miss Durand. We all thought that it would be left to the other young lady, to Miss St. Orme, and no one knew till the will was read how it was to go. Madame had never been fond of any one unless it were that sly Ross, who managed to put herself into the old mistress's good graces; she was found out at the last, though no one knew exactly how. Anyway, there'd been a dreadful scene"—so the kitchen authorities, none of them inclined to be lenient to poor Milly, had surmised—"Ross was sent away from the madame's room in disgrace, and so angry she were that she went a-threatening of the madame's life."

"Only an idle threat, of course," said Blair.

Jean shook her head with mysterious solemnity.

"Folks do say as how madame came to her death quite too suddenly; the doctors had their suspicions too, though they kept very quiet over 'em, and let the whole matter drop, which I say isn't according to the duty of Christian folk. Who's to know but that the rest of us, what a certain body might get a spite against, sha'n't go in the same way the madame did?"

"Anyway, it was known that the mistress wouldn't have Ross wait on her after finding of her out, witnessing which, I was called to take her place. But the very night she died, when I was out of the way, Ross pushed herself into madame's room, and the next thing that's known my aunt, who is a housekeeper here, is a-screaming out that the madame is dead."

"I know I shouldn't like to stand in the waiting-maid's shoes."

"But, lawk-a-me! It's a'most time for the bell, and all these berries to be bulled yet. If you'll come to the kitchen when you're through, I'll see that you have some good strong cider from the cellar, Mr. Blair."

"I'd rather take a sip from those beautiful lips," retorted the gallant swain.

And Jean, with a coquettish toss of her head and flirt of her starched skirts, tripped away toward the manse.

No sooner was she gone than the gardener's substitute dropped the implement with which he was working, and vaulting over the low hedge, pursued his way under the shadow of the orchard rows to the thick growth of pine woods beyond.

Once in their depths a wonderful transformation took place. The slouched hat was flung aside, and the flaming red wig came with it. The violent application of a handkerchief saturated with the contents of a little flask from his pocket, removed all traces of the florid complexion. The rough coat came off, disclosing a blouse of light cloth beneath it, and there stood the younger of the two night passengers who had come to recruit themselves amid the rural sports of rugged Fairview.

He gathered up the articles of apparel he had just discarded, and thrusting them into the covered basket which was avowedly a receptacle for the expected spoils of the finny persuasion, turned in the direction of the village.

When Ware returned to the office after his visit to the manse, he found Mr. Thancroft waiting impatiently for his appearance.

The lawyer had been engaged all the morning over the private papers of Madame Durand, and

among them he had come upon sundry receipts for sums of money paid to one Heloise Vaughn, and in the very bottom of the box was a letter, the paper of which was yellow and the ink pale with age. It was only a few lines, formal and business-like, acknowledging a favor from madame, and announcing the well-being of "the child." It was dated from Lyle Ridge, seventeen years before.

Mr. Thancroft's hand trembled with agitation as he folded the paper which had given him the first clew. "The child" he knew could be none other than the disinherited son of Jules Durand. His determination was taken in a moment, but he studied long over the best means of pursuing it.

Ware stared when his employer met him with a request that he should provide himself with a change of linen, and proceed direct to Lyle Ridge.

"I want to learn the present whereabouts of a woman named Heloise Vaughn who resided there seventeen years ago," he explained. "You may have some difficulty in tracing her after this lapse of time; if necessary go further, and do not stint yourself upon the matter of time if you find any grounds to work up the search. I would go myself, but there is an important reason why I should not be absent from Fairview for even a few hours, and North cannot be spared from his regular duties. How soon can you be ready to start?"

"In a couple of hours," answered Ware.

"The sooner the better. I will supply you with the requisite funds, of course."

Ware took his way to his apartments to prepare for his journey.

"What does the old fox want of Heloise Vaughn?" he asked himself, as he set about packing a small valise with such articles as he might need during a limited absence. "How would he take it, I wonder, if he knew that I could give him the information he's after without stirring a step on the wild-goose chase he'll find it, taking his plan of action?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Thancroft, I could give you surer information of the whereabouts of Heloise Vaughn than you'll be apt to find by following her erratic courses. But I'll not throw away this rare chance for a holiday; I'll take the time to mature the plan which shall aid me in winning beautiful Mirabel; I'll spend your money as pleases me best, you old guy of a lawyer; and meantime I'll make up my mind whether or no to give you that same information regarding the woman, Heloise Vaughn."

"One thing is patent to me, that she has no desire to communicate with you; so now what, crochets are you setting about to unravel that must needs have her at the bottom of it?"

In the hurry of his preparations for his unexpected journey, Lucian Ware utterly forgot the little gold tubed vial he had commissioned Ross to obtain for him, and two hours later he left Fairview, determined to take at least a week from the irksome duties pertaining to the office.

It grew dusk without, and lights were aflame within the manse that same evening. The dinner had been delayed for some reason, and the party of four were lingering over the dessert, when there came a sharp double knock, followed in a moment by the tramp of men's feet in the paved hall.

Ross was in the housekeeper's room, trimming a mourning-cap for Mrs. Briggs. She started to her feet in nervous alarm as the door fell back and two civil but determined-looking men advanced to confront her. They were the sheriff of the district and a single constable.

The butler, uncertain yet of the precise nature of their mission, hastened with a troubled face to call Valere. And the little party just leaving the dining-hall came upon this scene visible through the open door of the housekeeper's room.

The constable with his strong hand laid firmly upon the shoulder of shrinking, trembling Milly Ross, and the sheriff reading aloud the warrant of her arrest on suspicion of having poisoned Madame Durand.

Valere would have remonstrated but protest was quite in vain. The officers of the law were quietly obdurate when he would have persuaded them to keep guard over the frightened maid at the manse during that day and night. They had received their instructions, which they carried out to the very letter, and never lost sight of Ross after the moment of their entrance.

They hurried her away to the conveyance which was in waiting at the gate, and those who had disliked and envied the maid were left overtaken with affright and dismay at the nature of the calamity which had come upon her.

She was searched, and the little vial concealed upon her person was taken with other effects.

And the vial, subjected to the examination of Doctor Gaines and its contents chemically tested, was found to contain a subtle mineral poison of deadliest power.

This much North told her in the hope that she might explain her possession of it in a satisfactory way, for when appearances were blackest

against her the faithful fellow never doubted. But when she heard that, Ross closed her lips and would not utter the words which might point suspicion at Lucian Ware.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SATISFACTORY SOLUTION OF MR. THANCROFT'S PUZZLE.

WARE came back at the end of a week, and reported the non-success of his search to his employer. The lawyer was disappointed but scarcely surprised at this result, for he expected to encounter difficulties in the way of his object, which was to discover the sole descendant of this branch of the Durands to whom he was so faithfully devoted.

He put on his hat and went straight to the manse, revolving in his mind as he went the probable results of the caprice to which alone he attributed the perplexing condition of madame's will.

The more he reflected upon the case the more inextricable seemed the tangle involving it. If the two young people married, the rightful heir could have no claim whatever upon the estates which would pass indisputably into their possession; if they refused to marry, Fairview and its outlying possessions not only would be lost to the remotest connections of the family that so long had held it, but the Durand name would die out—the proud race be blotted from the recording annals of the times.

Of the two it was infinitely preferable that the conditions of madame's will should be strictly complied with, but here again rose embarrassing contingencies. Valere had refused to wed Miss Durand when she was the presumptive heiress; would he be more likely to woo her now as solely the requisite of a fortune which once before he had not deigned to stretch out his hand to obtain? If so, would Mirabel—proud descendant of a proud race—stoop to ally herself to an obscure young man, worthy enough in himself, Mr. Thancroft could not but admit, but destitute of family rank, and doubtful even of his right to the name he bore—would she accept him now through the mercenary motive she had hitherto avowedly disclaimed?

Mr. Thancroft groaned in spirit at the discouraging prospect. He looked for nothing less than for these two proud young people to turn perverse upon his hands, and refuse utterly to comply with the conditions of the will.

One possibility which the lawyer had entirely overlooked might have simplified the state of affairs to a straight, fair course; but it never occurred to him that Valere and Mirabel might find some stronger bond to draw them together than madame's imposed desire.

He met Valere upon the threshold, and the latter turned back with him to the library.

"I want a plain talk with you, Erne," said the lawyer, seating himself. "Have you time?"

"I am at your service. My business is not so important but that it can wait."

"Where were you going?"

"To consult you in the first place. I have had word from the Winston tract; there has been a large consignment of cattle from the upper mountain regions, and Winston writes that he is prepared to make the quarterly returns. I thought of taking the journey to-morrow, devoting one entire day to the settlement of all the business, and return upon the following day—to be absent three days in all."

"It will hurry you," said the lawyer. "As you like about that, though."

"I want to know, Valere, what are your intentions regarding this business of the estates. Madame's wish that the marriage should not be discussed for three months' time was simply to make sure that Miss Durand and yourself should take ample space to dispassionately consider the proposed alliance in all its bearings."

"It may seem premature to press the subject home to you before the expiration of the stipulated time, but you shall have my reasons for it."

"I have begun a search for Jules Durand, whom I have always felt that madame grievously wronged. Lord knows, I try not to judge her too harshly, and in nothing else was she ever cruelly unjust, though often dictatorial and exacting. Ah, poor madame! she might have been happier if she had but beaten down that stern pride of hers and proved forgiving."

"There, I'm apt to wander when I come to that point; but, as I've said, I've begun a search for the lad—for Jules's boy. Poor Jules! I loved him dearly, as though he had been my own younger brother. He was handsome and frank, with plenty of the Durand pride and a touch of madame's own waywardness. When she cast him off, he cut loose from all his old associations, and never knew—poor fellow!—that I held up for him through all. And now I want to show my friendship to the boy as I would have proved it to his father had I been permitted."

"I shall never rest until I discover him, and if then I could have the assurance that there will be a place open to him in the home of his ancestors, it would seem less like sorry comfort I would be bringing him."

"I understand you, my friend," said Valere, with quiet gravity. "Had I been left, uncon-

ditionally, heir to the estates, my first act should have been to prosecute the search which you have instituted, and to relinquish his rightful inheritance to madame's grandson when found."

"In my present embarrassing situation I have no liberty of action."

"Do you mean that you've no idea of complying with the madame's wishes?" asked the lawyer, bluntly.

Valere colored, but answered with ingenuous frankness.

"If we were both penniless, or both equally portioned, I could aspire to no greater happiness than the certainty of the marriage which madame proposed."

"I've found it quite impossible to be thrown into daily companionship with Miss Durand, to discern with every passing hour more and still more of the beauties of heart and soul which she possesses, and remain indifferent. But she is an heiress with her legacy of thirty thousand dollars and the Durand jewels, which are of fabulous worth, while I am merely—what I am. I cannot help myself from loving Mirabel Durand, and if I should be fortunate enough to awaken any responsive feeling in her heart, I shall go out into the world nerved to wring success from the tough battle of life. I could not ask more of her than that she might wait, for in any case I cannot accept the Durand inheritance."

"Then," cried Mr. Thancroft, springing up to wring the young man's hand in an ecstasy of delight, "there's hope that justice may yet be done. If I know Miss Durand, she'll be sooner won by your sterling honor than all the wealth of all the world. You are worthy of her, young man, and that is the highest praise I can bestow upon you."

"But, my dear sir," said Valere, smiling, yet embarrassed, "I have no certainty that Miss Durand can ever respond to my love. I have fancied sometimes that she is not quite indifferent, but hope is always illusive. If I can win her heart there must be a long probation before I shall reach a position to claim her hand. I must work out, at least, enough of fame and wealth as shall not be unworthy to be linked with the pride of the Durands."

"And, meantime, Fairview and madame's other wealth shall go to strangers, and, for any thing you know, the true heir may starve in a hovel, or rot in a dungeon in expiating crime to which misfortune and necessity might drive him! Great heavens, man! what false pride are you letting take possession of you? If you love Mirabel and Mirabel loves you, why should you put your chance of happiness away from you? You are in duty bound to act in accordance with madame's wishes, and if you violate her trust you deserve to frustrate your own hopes, too."

"I have thought of that," said Valere, slowly. "But how can I ask proud, perfect Mirabel to become party to such a transaction of buying and selling as that would make her acceptance of me appear—if I should have that joy?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mr. Thancroft, impatiently. "I tell you it will be proof of greater nobility than a lifetime spent in the endeavor to win fame and fortune, as you propose, like a romantic young simpleton. Lord send that Miss Durand exhibits better sense."

Before Valere comprehended his motive or could prevent it, had he been so disposed, the lawyer rung the bell and sent a request to Mirabel to join them there in the library.

She came, stately and fair, and pure as a peerless lily, her face touched with the pensive, subdued expression which befit her deep mourning robes.

Valere felt that he could have knelt before her with the pure devotion he would have offered at a holy shrine; but the impulsive little lawyer, who did not see with the eyes of the infatuated lover, passed over his greeting with Miss Durand and broke upon the subject which was uppermost in his thoughts.

"There's a question for your decision, Miss Mirabel, and this selfish, ungenerous young Valere is throwing the worst of imputations upon you. He is proposing to leave Fairview, to violate the trust imposed upon him by the madame, and all, forsooth! because you must needs be of too mercenary a disposition to take him poor in all except sworn devotion and romantic nonsense! He declares that he can never usurp the inheritance of the rightful heir, yet he is not generous enough to believe you capable of aiding to restore it."

"What say you, Miss Durand? Are you willing to marry this unworlly youth, who declares if the Durand estates were possessed by him, his first act would be to consign them all to the son of Jules Durand? Will you encourage him in such preposterous folly, Miss Mirabel Durand?"

Mirabel turned her dark, earnest eyes full upon blushing young Valere, and her glance was eloquent of approval and admiration.

"It would be a noble deed," said she, softly.

"Ah-ha!" chuckled the lawyer, rubbing his hands together in quiet glee. "Why, how sultry it has grown all at once! See here, you

young people, I'll just take a turn in the open air for a half-hour while you decide this matter between you."

The door closed after his retreating form, and Valere stood before Mirabel with downcast eyes, mute and embarrassed. For a moment only, and then he met her glance with one of earnest, frank truthfulness.

"I love you, Mirabel," he said, the accents dropping soft and tender from his lips. "I am poor, nameless, friendless almost, and alone in all the world; but I love you, and if you will it, I shall turn my back on all Fairview and never seek you nor plead my cause, until I am able to offer you a home of ease and a name which will be honorable in the eyes of the world."

"Madame's will shall not fetter you, beautiful Mirabel, even to right the wrong she would not undo. I ask no answer, I exact no promise. I only assure you that my love is deep, and true, and strong enough to struggle against all odds, and to last through all time."

She took a step nearer to him, with a rare light sweeping over her fair, high-bred face.

"If I were penniless, you would love me all the same?" she asked, never doubting the truth of what she knew his answer would be.

"If you were penniless, Mirabel, I would offer you my whole heart's love and prove it by a lifetime's evidence."

She went close to him and laid her small fair hand upon his sleeve.

"Then we will follow the line of our duty and be happier for having done so. No tithe shall stand between us, Erne."

There was no mistaking the tender lights of the deep dark eyes, the softening curves of the rare, proud countenance.

"You love me? Oh, Mirabel!"

His strong arms closed her in, and with heart beating back to heart, lip answering to lip, their betrothal vow was recorded—the register of truth between them until death was fixed beyond the power of coming trials to wipe it out.

Mirabel released herself from his close embrace, and drew him to a place beside her, presently.

"Let me tell you what my sacrifice must be to leave me worthy of such devotion as yours," said she.

"Oh, sweet!" interrupted Erne, reproachfully, but she closed his lips, with her dainty hand.

"Dear heart, I have loved you from the first, but nothing except your unswerving honor and noble resolve could have ever won me. I shall come to you, my love, without one single penny of madame's bequest. Will you not even yet disclaim such a poverty-stricken bride?"

"It is only you I want, my Mirabel."

"Then this is what I shall do, true love:

"All those rare priceless jewels properly belong to the Durand inheritance, and they shall be included in the assignment of the estate and personal property to Jules Durand's son."

"And the thirty thousand dollars, madame's legacy to me, I will make over to Fay St. Orme upon my marriage-day."

"And I shall love you so faithfully, sweet, that you shall never know the privations you are taking it upon yourself to brave," cried Erne, in a rapture of delighted admiration.

Their perfect bliss was alloyed by a reminder of terrestrial things, through the return of Mr. Thancroft in a glow of entire satisfaction. He had taken a peep in through the window to make sure of the state of affairs arrived at, and to him their decision was straightway imparted.

In vain the lawyer raved and remonstrated against the resolve which Miss Durand had taken. She was firm, immovable.

And, despite his annoyance over this, Mr. Thancroft seemed to walk upon air as he trod the steep path down the mountain.

CHAPTER XIX.

A NIGHT INTERVIEW.

THE lawyer did not return at once to his business office. He took the Fairview House on his way, and was admitted to an interview with the man Drake, who, with his companion, still occupied apartments there. It had been whispered, though, since the arrest of Milly Ross, that these two men were detectives, brought here and put upon the trail of the suspected criminal by madame's executors.

Mr. Thancroft's mind now was full of another work. Heloise Vaughn must be found, and the task of doing it was intrusted to Drake, whose professional acumen and acquired knowledge, would be more certain of success than Ware's search, conducted without much system or diligence.

"What's the description?" asked Drake, making note of the dates of the receipts and letter.

"Of the woman?" asked the lawyer, doubtfully.

"Yes."

"I never saw her in my life."

"That's unfortunate. It's so easy to change a name; and you have no idea of her age or condition?"

"Not the slightest. You might learn that at Lyle Ridge."

"There's the danger that I'll get started on different tracks," said Drake. "People's mem-

ories are so apt to vary after any considerable lapse of time."

Mr. Thancroft was sanguine, though he foresaw difficulties and delay, in the consummation of the object he had at heart.

His great joy over the concession made by Valere and Mirabel could not be quite self-contained, and so it came to the ears of Lucian Ware during the day—the news of the betrothal of these two whom madame had been so desirous to have joined together.

An agony of mortified rage and despair filled his soul.

He had not imagined that any step would be taken, any definite understanding reached until the expiration of a number of months to come. He had thought to forestall Valere and to force Mirabel's responsive love by the sheer impetuosity of his own passion.

"She shall be mine—*mine*, if all the world stand between!" came the willful cry of his desperate heart.

There were thoughts surging through his soul that day—a bitter, resentful flood—that would not have borne the light of exposition, and which threatened the clear horizon of the devoted lovers' hopes.

For once he was thankful for the accumulated tasks which fell to his share. The necessity which obliged him to concentrate his mind upon the mechanical performance of these enabled him to overcome the first uprising of fiendish passion that tempted him to break the bonds of restraint he so rigidly imposed upon himself.

With the evening, and his release from duty, he sought his own apartments, to fall into a deep, moody reverie, objectless, yet but leading him gradually on to the verge of dark contemplations.

In the midst of his abstraction there came a rap at his door, timid at first, but repeated with impatient sharpness. He composed his features, and after a slight delay, opened to the summons.

There, shrinking in the shadow, stood Fay St. Orme, quite alone. She advanced into the room, shivering, although the night was warm. A large dark cloak shrouded her form, but her glittering yellow hair was uncovered and damp with dew. A fever of unrest and excitement was pulsing through her veins, staining her lips and cheeks with vivid crimson, and gleaming in fitful flames in her unnaturally bright eyes.

Ware placed a seat for her, but himself remained standing.

"To what am I indebted for such an honor, Miss St. Orme?" he asked, coldly.

Fay locked her hands nervously together, with a half hysterical sob.

"Oh, Lucian, Lucian! you will kill me with your cruelty. Oh, for my very life's sake, don't speak so coldly now!"

He comprehended the pitch of high excitement to which she was wrought, and crossing the room to a little sideboard, poured some wine from an open bottle which stood there, and brought it to her. She drank it, and with an effort subdued her rising agitation.

"Control yourself, Fay; and tell me what brings you here at this late hour, and unattended? Why did you not send for me instead?"

"I only learned to-night of your return. Have you not heard—they say the madame was really poisoned, and they have arrested Ross."

"Good God!" cried Lucian, starting back in horror.

It was his first intimation of the occurrence. He had not been away from the office during the day, and Mr. Thancroft was too much occupied with his discovery of the morning and subsequent interests to remember that Ware was ignorant of the fact. North was not apt to refer to it.

"It is true. Oh, Lucian, you never set her to do the deed?"

"You should know better than that. You should know who is responsible for madame's death."

"Not I, as Heaven hears me! You believe me now, Lucian?"

He was forced to do so, witnessing her passionate appeal and her unmasked depths of terror for him.

"Then it must be all a mistake," said he, with a relieved sigh. "Whatever led them to suspect, I wonder?"

"Madame's foreboding, perhaps, and they found the vial of poison upon Ross. I know you must have bribed her to get possession of it. Are we not all in danger, Lucian?"

"Certainly not, if it be as you say—as I believe now. It will be readily proved that madame died a natural death, and though the appearance of the vial may seem suspicious, it can count as nothing. Assure yourself; there can be no absolute danger."

His confidence inspired Fay with a sense of security, and she controlled herself to give him a succinct account of every thing relating to the arrest. He passed it over lightly, unaffected by the meek devotion of the waiting-maid who had refused to implicate his name in an effort to clear herself; and with little sympathy for her present discomfort since he assured himself it could amount to nothing more serious.

"But they are going to hold an inquest," cried Fay, shudderingly. "Why can't they let madame rest in her grave? The thought of it all has given me the horrors for a week."

Lucian ground his teeth with sudden rage.

"I hope to heaven she may find no rest beyond it," he cried, sibilantly.

He turned away and walked the apartment excitedly twice or thrice, then paused again.

"What is this I hear," he asked, in strained, cold tones; "this in regard to Valere and—Miss Durand?"

It was not without a struggle that he could link her name with that of his rival, but he forced himself to do so calmly.

There was a gleam of triumphant light in Fay's eyes, but she too repressed her intense feeling on this subject, so vitally but differently interesting to them all.

"They have acknowledged the engagement which was expected of them. That, and declare their intention of making some absurd sacrifices. I can denounce their folly, though I am to gain by it. I shall be thirty thousand dollars the richer, Lucian."

If she had entertained any hope of winning him back to her side with that, she was disappointed—at least for the time.

He was rigid and white as a statue of marble, and his eyes grown pale with steely scintillations. Fay slunk back appalled before the concentrated white-heat of passion.

For the space of a moment, which seemed an age, he stood so. Then he turned to her with the color creeping back to his face, and a smile that had neither warmth nor sincerity forced to his lips.

"Let me see you back to the manse, Miss St. Orme."

Silently she gathered her cloak about her and went with him out into the night.

He left her at the gate with a simply uttered "good-night!" and Fay St. Orme threw herself down on the dew-damp earth, clutching her hand in the close-shaven turf, choking down her passion to a kind of low, muttered sobbing. This love of hers had awakened depths in Fay St. Orme's nature, and stirred up degrees of bitterness which made her truly a subject of pity.

A step, by her unheeded, passed over the turf, and a woman's figure stooped over her in the starlight, bent low, and touched her with cold, passive fingers.

"Get up; you'll take your death of cold here," said a voice—the voice of the woman whom Lucian Ware had met in the wood. And Fay lifted herself, dragged with dew, quivering with her suppressed emotion, drooping and miserable under the pale gleam of the stars.

"I want to know what is doing at the manse," said the woman. "I feel trouble in the air and pressing on my heart. Was that Lucian I heard passing in the wood?"

"He has just gone."

"I knew his step, but I did not stop him. I have done him no good, and I've threatened him with harm; it must be that, or the trouble wouldn't brood so close and heavy."

She was muttering to herself rather than speaking to the girl at her side.

"What is Lucian to you?" asked Fay. "And why do you lurk about the manse as I have seen you once or twice? It was you who came to me the night madame died."

"No matter for that," said the other, with impatience. "Will you tell me what is occurring at the manse, or must I take other means to find it out?"

Frightened by her vehemence, and impressed by her manner, Fay related first the suspicions regarding madame's death, the arrest of Ross, and at last the announced betrothal of Valere and Miss Durand.

The woman's slender, strong fingers closed upon her arm to a painful grip, and her breath came in short, agonizing gasps.

"It must not be—it must not—it must not, I say! They must not marry, those two. Promise me that you will do all in your power to prevent it. Promise to keep me informed of every step they take up there. Treasure up every word you hear regarding this marriage they propose, and tell it to me if you would avert a terrible fate."

A suspicion shot into the mind of Fay—a suspicion that this woman was employed by Lucian Ware to forward his own hopes of yet winning Mirabel.

"Did he bribe you to frighten me?" she asked, with angry scorn. "Does Lucian think to blind me to his object so easily?—does he think to persuade me by such poor strategy to aid him in winning my rival? I would sooner see Lucian Ware dead than see him wedded to Mirabel, whom I hate because he loves her."

"If she marries the other one it will be death to Lucian," said the woman, in hollow, awe-stricken, earnest tones; and then, without another word, she turned to speed away swift and silent as a flitting shadow.

"It was done to frighten me," said Fay to herself. "Surely it could be nothing more."

But a chill of apprehensive dread ran over her frame.

CHAPTER XX.

WHAT HAPPENED TO VALERE.

VALERE did not go upon his journey on the following day as he had proposed. There was a solemn duty to be performed at the manse which there was now no reason to delay. There had been some hanging back on the part of Dr. Gaines, who was not prepared to declare his convictions, but now he announced himself ready with his testimony.

The lead coffin in its shell of ebony was lifted from its niche in the family vault, and borne into one of the deserted rooms of the old tower. The coroner and a jury of twelve men, selected from the most intelligent class of the country about, held an inquest on the body of Madame Durand.

The object of the long private consultation upon the day of the funeral was now brought to light. There had been a *post-mortem* examination, but the results were so obscure and unsatisfactory that it had not been deemed expedient then to place the matter before the public. The professor had declared that madame's death was caused by poison, but of what nature he could not determine until he should bring chemical analysis to bear in developing the traces left, and substantiating his expressed belief.

He returned to the inquest fully prepared to demonstrate what had been little more than surmise before. Doctor Gaines had been studying closely into both the direct and remote operations and results of the subtler poisons, and his researches led him to indorse the statements of the professor.

The coffin was opened, and by virtue of the tests applied, and comparisons made with former analysis, the physicians proved beyond a doubt that madame had died of a mineral poison.

But the current opinion that it was the liquid contained in the little vial found upon the person of Ross at the time of her arrest, was exploded by the professor's testimony, corroborated by that of the country physician.

It contained a poison, subtle and deadly in its effects, and the gold tube was an ingenious contrivance by means of which it could be measured out in the minutest quantities, but it had not been administered to Madame Durand.

The liquid in the vial would cause death if taken alone or disguised in any preparation of food or drink; death would also result if it was injected directly into the blood; but there were evidences to show that madame's death had resulted from a poison absorbed through the pores of the cuticle.

The professor had observed on the occasion of that first examination, some minute crystallized spangles on the bottom of a small china basin which had been handed him for use. He had put it aside and subsequently ascertained that this basin had been used to contain the liniment prescribed for madame's paralyzed limbs. He had carefully secured the crystallized atoms, and also the liniment which remained in the bottle. The latter he had found free of any deleterious ingredient, but the crystals were deadly poison.

The servants and members of the household were afterward separately examined, and the testimony was all calculated to throw dark suspicion upon poor Ross.

Mr. Thancroft, under oath, related the fact that she had been found eavesdropping upon the day he had drawn up madame's will, and that she had fallen into disgrace with her mistress for that fault. Jean stated that the maid had threatened madame's life in her hearing. All certified to the fact that madame had banished her from immediate attendance, and it was proved that in defiance of the mandate Ross had answered the bell and waited upon her mistress shortly before the latter was found dead.

The evidence was all taken, and the verdict of the jury returned. It was: "That Madame Durand had come to her death on the twenty-third day of June, 1869, through the agency of a subtle and powerful poison, administered by the hand of Mildred Ross."

And Milly Ross was remanded to prison to be brought to trial by the course of law.

Madame's remains were reinterred to the vault beneath the tree, and the solemn assembly scattered from the place.

It had been a painful ordeal for the household at the manse; but the necessary duty was performed and the ordinary avocations taken up again.

On the morning following, Valere breakfasted alone just as the rosy glows of sunrise shot across the pale azure of the skies. Most faithfully was he adhering to the letter of that condition requiring the fulfillment of all duties pertaining to his office.

The ordinary household were just getting astir as he passed out through the hall, taking his hat and gloves from the rack. Briggs was opening the rooms, and Jean was at hand with broom and duster. He passed them with a pleasant word, and paused a moment in the little court where the dew was hanging in heavy drops from leaves and blossoms, and the sweet moist fragrance went out in welcoming to the early sunrays.

He glanced up at the windows of Mirabel's

room, hoping for a glimpse of her, though scarcely expecting that she had yet arisen; he had made his adieu to the trio of ladies on the preceding evening, and later claimed a few private words with Mirabel.

"Only for three days," he had said, smilingly. "Such a little time, and I am dreading it as though I should not know this dear presence again for weeks."

"And it was you who would have gone out to wrench fame and wealth from the world, without so much as an assurance to shorten the time. Did you expect to win fickle fortune in an hour?"

"Is it unreasonable?" smiled Valere. "Certainty is so much dearer than hope."

Then their leave-taking, and they had parted. Now, as he glanced upward, he saw an open shutter, and a little hanging-basket of heliotrope in the window gently swayed by the morning breeze, but no sight of Mirabel.

Even as he paused there, a light step passed the piazza, a soft rustle of sweeping robes, and she stood beside him with the sweet, fair face so tenderly wistful, that he could scarcely resist his passionate desire to clasp her to his heart in a close, fond embrace. He held her hand, and stooped until his bronzed cheek brushed her hair.

"Parting sweets," said he, with the glad surprise of seeing her mirrored in his eyes. "You have thrown a rosy glow over my day-path, darling. You looked almost sad, my queen Mirabel."

"It must be that all the sorrowful details of yesterday's revelations are weighing upon me; though it seems like some undefined apprehension of a dread to come. I wish you were not going, Erne."

"What a precious flaw to find in my jewel. I thought you were perfect, Mirabel, and this little touch of superstitious foreboding tells me that you will miss one little link from the joys of the time."

"Don't linger," she said. "It is time you were on your way?"

"Yes, sweet; my horse is waiting at the gates, but it is hard to tear myself away."

She smiled up into his face; and slipping her hand within his arm, walked with him down through the twisting walks. There at the gates they parted, she with dewy, uplifted eyes; he with the proud thrill of rightful claim upon this peerless creature, and yearning tenderness too deep for words. A silent, scarcely demonstrative, but soulful parting.

An unseen spectator from the shadows of the neighboring trees, ground his teeth in silent rage, and flashed a glance of mortal hatred after the unsuspecting steward of the great estates.

Lucian Ware, unable to gain sleep or rest, had left his chambers at the village with the first peep of dawn. The unhappy promptings of his unreciprocated love led him up the mountain-side, where, at least, he might feel his proximity to Mirabel. And now the selfish depths of his soul were stirred anew as he read aright the mutual, unwavering heart-trust of that simple parting.

He saw Mirabel turn back to the manse, with a wild desire to leap the boundaries, and bear her bodily away from the protecting love of the rival who had superseded him. But, withal, he never moved, nor let drop one word of the bitter tumult of thoughts which raged in his mind.

The three days went by, and Mirabel nervously waited Erne's return. The dinner hour came and passed, and the lights from the manse shone out through the purpling shadows of the brooding night. Miss Gaines napped in a great chair in the corner, and Fay—for lack of better employment—was stringing a treble strand of pink coral beads, although she could not wear them with her mourning attire.

Miss Durand turned her back upon the room and its unheeding inmates to watch the stars come out one by one and chase the blending shadows with their pale gleams. A whippoorwill in the wood sounded its mournful plaint, and insects in the shrubbery chirped unceasingly. Presently she swung back the casement and stepped out into the pleasant night.

It was vain to resist that influence which drew her on down through the grounds to the gate where she had parted from him. With her dress gathered up from contact with the grassy borders, and all the nervous anxiety which possessed her applied to the one sense of listening for the faintest sound to herald his approach, she waited.

A human step broke the stillness, and a soft sigh of disappointment wavered over her lips. She turned away, hesitated, and stood still as she recognized the step.

It was North who came in through the gate, and paused at seeing her.

"Miss Durand?" he asked, half in doubt.

"It is I, North," she answered, with quick compassion stirring, for, even in that dim light, she could see how dejected and heartsore he had grown. "How is poor Milly—have you seen her?"

"To-day, miss! She's taking it badly; too quiet and subdued to bear up, I think. Oh, Miss Mirabel! she never is guilty of that terrible crime—if you only would believe it."

"I feel sure of it, North. I was with her when we found the madame that night and there was no guilt struggling with her great real grief. I don't know what to think—I am in a maze of perplexity and dismay. But I can not believe that Ross is in any way implicated, though they bring such dark suspicions to bear against her."

"Oh, bless you for so much as that," he cried, chokingly. "You're the first one of them all that hasn't turned against her. It puts heart into me to hope there'll be some way out of the trouble."

"There must be. Surely—surely, the innocent will not be permitted to suffer. Hark! what is that?"

"I hear nothing."

She held up her hand warningly, and bent forward her head to listen. For a moment the stillness of the night was broken only by the shrill chirp of insects, and then she distinguished the sound again before North's duller sense had caught it.

"A horse's hoofs thundering up the mountain-side. The break-neck pace of a reckless rider; can it be Mr. Valere?"

"I never knew him to ride like that," said the clerk, apprehensively. "It's not safe up this rocky way; it's not him, or—" He broke off the sentence to throw the gate wide, and draw Mirabel from the track. He suspected what she did not as yet.

Shivering, she stood there, and nearer came the thunderous hoofs. They wavered aside, then sprung forward again; and the horse passed them like a flash.

A riderless horse, with rolling, fiery eyes, and foaming nostrils—that much they could see.

Mirabel stood still and mute, while one throes of fearful anguish convulsed her being. Then, with the calmness born of desperate necessity, she dropped her hand upon her companion's arm.

"Come with me; we must find him!"

North would have remonstrated, but she gave him no opportunity. She sped over the rugged road, scarcely seeming to touch the ground, and taxing the utmost effort of the clerk to keep pace with her.

On at that mad rate for more than a mile. And then, with a sharp cry, Mirabel sprung ahead to fall by the side of a dark, motionless heap, in the dusty road.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHOSE HAND STRUCK THE BLOW?

THE stalwart form whose supple strength she had gloried in lying prone and helpless in the dust; the proud head stricken down, the features set with a pallid gleam as her agonized gaze sought them through the dusk. Oh, the agony of the moment for Mirabel, until her trembling fingers tore open his waistcoat and traced the faint beating of his heart.

"Not dead! Oh, dear Lord, I thank Thee," breathed her grateful heart in silent prayer, as she lifted the dead weight of that helpless head and pillowed it on her loving breast.

A warm, sluggish stream flowed over her hand, and the short, crisp locks of his hair were matted with the ebbing tide.

"Blood," said North, who was kneeling now by her side, in answer to Mirabel's moan of horror. "He must have been thrown against the jagged edge of some one of these rocks. We must bind up the wound, and get aid here at once."

"Oh, cruel rock! Oh, poor, poor love!" whispered Mirabel, over the pallid, unanswering face. And then her finger—quickened by her fear that this silent, ebbing flood was stealing away the chances of a life dearer than her own—fell in softest touches until they found a gaping wound. She tore her dainty little handkerchief in strips and pressed them firmly on the bleeding cut, then with North's and Valere's, strained a thick bandage over it.

"Go now, quickly as you can," she said, turning her face toward the clerk. "I will stay here with him."

Without waiting another word, North dashed away, and Mirabel was left to her vigil.

Oh, the agonized suspense of the moments as they dragged away; the mute horror of knowing that the stirless form might grow rigid in her clasp before help should come. Would the unconscious mind wake to the infinite yearning of her spirit over him, or would it waft away through the mystery of space? Would the closed eyes unveil the mirrored depths of strong, pure love, or were they sealed forever from the intensity of mortal strife for both joy and grief?

But at last came the steady tramp of advancing feet, the flicker and glare of lights, and the subdued voices of men in awed converse. They paused by her side, and put down a rude litter hastily constructed and furnished with soft blankets and downy pillows. Valere, unconscious and motionless as the dead, was lifted upon it, and then willing hands took up the burden, and the little procession went gently and solemnly back to the manse.

Doctor Gaines was there by the time the manse was reached, and at once took the responsibility of all directions.

"Take him straight up to the old madame's

room," he ordered. "There are the best arrangements for an invalid's comfort in that. No hysteria nor fainting among you women, there, I say. Get away out of sight and sound if you have no command over yourselves."

This last was addressed to his spinster sister and to Fay, who had hurried out to break into sharp ejaculations of fright and dismay as they saw the deathlike figure. Mirabel, pale and drooping like a blighted flower, and without a word or moan, kept her place by the side of Valere.

He was laid on the great ebony bedstead in madame's room, and at a word of dismissal the bearers went silently away. With one glance at the white, quiet face of Miss Durand, the doctor realized what intolerable suspense would be to her.

"Have you nerve to help me with an examination, Miss Durand?" he asked. "I want you to hold his head entirely firm while I probe that ugly wound."

Mirabel was sick at heart, but there was not a tremor in the white hand which smoothed back the gory locks, while the physician stooped above him with the glitter of some minute instrument under his thumb.

As the wound was fairly disclosed, Doctor Gaines opened his lips, and cast a quick glance of surprise at Mirabel. He did not speak, however, and immediately resumed his task.

All the while the wound was being probed and dressed, the injured man never moved nor uttered a single moan. Only the fluttering movement of the heart told that life lingered in the still frame.

"He is badly stunned, and no wonder, after that blow," said the doctor, in quiet tones. "It is a very dangerous hurt, but not necessarily mortal; I tell you this at once, Miss Durand, for I judge it is better you should know the entire truth. This wound is not the result of an accident."

North, who remained in the room, came forward.

"I beg pardon," said he. "He was thrown from his horse. Was he dragged, do you think? I could find no rock to account for such a clean cut."

"No rock made it," asserted the doctor. "At least it is not the result of his fall. He has been assassinated."

"Assassinated!" echoed North, while Mirabel strained her hands together over her heart with a shuddering cry.

"He has been attacked from behind, and only this single blow struck. I should think by a club of tough, hard wood. There is a contusion on his forehead where he struck the ground, which is the effect of his fall. Had this blow fallen upon him fairly it must have crushed in his skull; but something—perhaps the swerve of his horse—directed it to the side, leaving the clear cut you have seen."

An appalled silence had fallen on the two listeners, which North broke after a moment.

"Has he been robbed?"

"I don't know yet. I left word for Thancroft when I came from the village; he will know what sum of money the young man was expected to carry. I've made sure that his pocket-book is on his person, but its contents may have been tampered with."

"Oh, I do not think that my darling had an enemy in the world," spoke Mirabel. "Would man's covetousness tempt to this? Oh, cruel, cruel!"

It was but a little time until a message was brought to the door that Mr. Thancroft waited below. At a word from the doctor he was ushered into the room where Valere lay and they were gathered.

He was shocked and pained beyond expression at the sad occurrence. He named the sum Valere had expected to receive, an aggregate of several thousand dollars, derived from the quarterly return of rents, and proceeds of the stock raised on the upper mountain farms.

It was all found undisturbed on his person. His plain gold watch had not been removed; all the papers he carried were arranged methodically, by his own hand, it was evident.

The attack had not been made for the purpose of robbery, then. The motive must remain a mystery for the time, they decided, and deprived of any clue, they had nothing to work upon in tracing the assassin.

"Unless," said Doctor Gaines, with a keen glance at Mirabel, "unless Miss Durand can throw some light into the obscurity."

"Pardon me, my dear young lady, for seeming officious—but you understand why I should venture such a question. Is there any one—any former admirer of yours—who might have followed you here, and wreaked his disappointment in this heartrending way?"

Mr. Thancroft, who remembered the madame's allusions to the persecutions Mirabel had borne, when her unprotected position should have commanded respect, waited, with grave anxiety, for her reply. But Miss Durand answered with decision.

"No one. I must admit that I was the recipient of undesired attentions more than once, but never the object of such mad passion as

would lead to this. Those men—"she named them, with scornful reluctance—"presumed upon the fact of my utter loneliness—for I was friendless, homeless. Judge for yourselves if they would incline to follow me here where I have found the protection of a recognized influence, the shelter of a secure home."

"Then we are left where we began, quite in the dark," said Mr. Thancroft.

"And permitting that question to stand, we must take every precaution to advance the recovery of our patient," said Doctor Gaines, with grave impressiveness.

"You, Miss Durand, had better retire; and don't go to the opposite extreme to pay the penalty of this strained composure you have so bravely maintained. No, I'll not hear a demur! Valere will not be conscious for hours yet, and the chances are that he'll have a wild delirium by to-morrow. A man's brain don't stand such a shock unaffected by it. He'll not need you this night, but afterward he may, and you must reserve your strength. Shall I give you a sleeping-potion, Miss Durand?"

"I am not nervous, and I shall not suffer any prostration. But, oh, do not deceive me, or send me away if his danger is imminent."

"I assure you there will be scarcely a perceptible change for hours. The danger will follow when the fever rises, if he does not rally bodily strength to resist it. I shall sleep at the manse to-night, to be at hand if any change does occur. He needs nothing now but quiet watching."

Convinced, Mirabel dropped her face over the pale, silent one upon the pillow, and with his lips warmed by a touch of hers, glided away to seek such repose as her overwrought faculties would receive.

The physician's hopeful expectations were not realized speedily. Valere lay in that unconscious deathlike state during all the following day and night, and it was not until the third day the fever and delirium set in. Doctor Gaines grew unwontedly grave.

He telegraphed to a distance for an experienced nurse, who was installed in the sick room. Mirabel shared the vigils, but the doctor would not permit her to relinquish either rest or active exercise.

So days went by until two weeks had gone, and the crisis of life or death had come and passed. Erne lay, wasted to a sad reminder of his manly strength, with the breath of life just flickering over his lips; but the dark shadow which had threatened him, shrunk away before the dawning of his new lease upon life.

Tranquil rest for Mirabel now, since the dear life she prized was spared to her.

And meantime Ware had come to the manse daily to make inquiries after the injured man. His passion was wearing upon him like that subtle, deadly essence which no vase could be found to withstand.

Mirabel had heard of his constant solicitude, and now that there was joyful news she went down to impart the cheer to one whom she only knew as the supposed friend of her betrothed.

Ware's face grew radiant at sight of her, and he stooped over her extended hand to conceal the white flame of his eager eyes.

"He will live," breathed Mirabel. "The crisis is over, and he will live."

A convulsive clasp of her fair hand was the only answer, the only demonstration of the tide of disappointed rage which swept through his soul.

But, when his gaze rested upon Mirabel's face, so illumined now with joy, though pallid with painful vigils and long suspense, a great surge swept away his forced composure.

"Mirabel, oh! peerless, radiant Mirabel! I am dying for you—I can not live without you. To snatch a perishing soul from the very clutch of the fiends of perdition, tell me that there is still a chance to win that precious love I can not live without."

Her glance rested upon him piteously.

"I thought you knew my heart is no longer mine to give," she said, with such sweet pride thrilling through her tones as served to rouse all the demon in him.

He spoke never a word. But there came a flash across his perfectly-modeled face which transformed it from almost angelic beauty to fiendish malignity; and the cruel, cold flame that leaped into those paling eyes came with the shock of a sickening revelation to Miss Durand.

That lightning glance which spoke of frenzied love and deadly hate—that, and he had turned from her and strode, with even steps, away.

But Mirabel, shrinking, with a numbing horror turning her blood to ice, clasped her hands over her eyes, and whispered, to herself:

"God forgive me if I judge him wrongly, but I believe his hand struck that murderous blow."

CHAPTER XXII. THE MISSING BRIDE.

VALERE gained but slowly. Time drew itself lingeringly through the sweet summer days, but all too fast was it for the hearts—some that were happy, and some that were heavy—in Fairview Glen.

Drake prospered but poorly in his search for

the woman who should restore the true heir of the Durands. Nevertheless, he did not give up the search, for the very inconsistencies which baffled him challenged him on to the task.

And the weeks rolling around brought very close the time when Milly Ross should be brought to trial. North had been at work with all the energy which desperation will lend, but things were looking darkly for poor Milly Ross.

The clerk made his appearance at the manse one day, and asking for Miss Durand, was ushered above to the private sitting-room, where she and Fay were passing the morning together. Mirabel welcomed him most cordially; she liked the open, honest spirit of the obscure young man, and her womanly sympathy could reach down to a pitying contemplation of the deep sorrow which oppressed him.

"I've come on a mission from Milly, Miss Durand; one that she charged me with that night when Mr. Valere was attacked, and his danger put every other thought out of my head for the time. She says that when she put away the jewels after Madame's death, the key broke as she turned the lock of the last casket. She left orders down at the village for another one; I was to bring it to you and see that it answered. I hope that my neglect hasn't been any inconvenience."

"None to me, North. You know my intention to give up possession of the jewels?"

"They'll not find one more fit to wear them," said North, in respectful admiration. "If you'll be so kind as to try the key, I'll know whether any alterations will need to be made on it."

Mirabel crossed the room and brought the caskets, one at a time, placing them on the little dark solid table. She took the key, but it worked stiffly in the lock.

"It will need some filing off at the edge," said North, but with his stronger hand overcame the resistance, and the lids of the jewel-boxes sprung back, one by one.

Fay, with a cry of delight, fluttered above the glittering contents.

"Oh, the magnificent darlings! The great, sparkling brilliants; the lustrous pearls; the glowing, fiery rubies; amethysts, turquoises, emeralds, opals, all here. How can you think of giving them up, Miss Durand?"

Mirabel smiled silently as she passed her fair, unjeweled hand through the glittering heap. She took up the ring, which was circled around with alternate amethysts and pearls.

"It is very unique," she said, turning it slowly. "I remember Ross' saying she could not find the spring to replace it in its golden shield."

"Ugh!" shuddered Fay. "Madame had it on her hand after she was dead. It suggests graves and ghoulies; I'd never wear that if the jewels belonged to me. Ah, it has just come to me! That ring is a matchpiece to the necklace about the painted throat of Madame Rosalie Durand."

"The lost necklace! Yes, it certainly is," said Mirabel, without attaching any importance to the fact.

North leaned toward her, and his hand shook as he extended it.

"Will you permit me, Miss Durand? Are not the pearls a little discolored?—and look! there is one loose in the setting."

He turned the ring round and round with a grave, disquieted face.

"Loose?—so it is. And the sharp tracery is fretting it. I wish it could be remedied at once, but I do not like to trust it in the hands of the village workmen," said Mirabel.

The grave doubt upon North's face cleared.

"If you'll trust it to me, Miss Durand; I shall leave for Philadelphia this evening. I'm going on business relating to—to—the trial. I'll be glad to undertake the commission for you."

"And I am glad of the opportunity," said Mirabel, handing him the ring.

Shortly after North took his leave, but more than once he paused on his way to assure himself of the safety of the ring.

"It seems like a wild hope," he whispered to himself, on one of these occasions. "A wild, desperate hope. But, God help me! it is the only one that is left."

And while the clerk pursued his way, Valere awoke from the sleep which had not refreshed him. Mirabel was at his side and remained with him through all the afternoon, but the unfavorable symptoms did not abate. Thoroughly alarmed at last, she dispatched a messenger for Doctor Gaines, and imposed utter quiet in the sick-room.

"I could be satisfied to sit here and look at you forever," said Erne, "but I must disobey your command, nevertheless, Queen Mirabel. I must speak of the thoughts which are troubling me. I am not mending fast, my love; and suppose—suppose a relapse should come—suppose I should not get well again?"

"Oh, Erne!"

"It has been troubling me—this thought. We may be neglecting that which is sacredly our duty, Mirabel. We may defer making restitution until it is too late."

No need of him speaking more plainly. There was a little silence between them, broken by the doctor's entrance.

"What's this, I want to know?" he asked, with bustling cheerfulness. "What are you

doing with this patient of ours, Miss Durand? Haven't I had enough trouble with him, without his falling back upon my hands?"

"You can't regret it more than I do, Doctor." "You haven't been crossing his whims, or letting him worry?"

"That's just it, doctor," put in the invalid. "She is letting me worry."

"Well, well; that will never do—it'll not answer at all, Miss Durand. Sick people must be humored, you know. Now, my dear young sir, what is it with which you are finding fault?"

"Well, doctor, I want my wife to take care of me."

The doctor pursed his lips, with a comical twinkle in his gray, good-humored eyes.

"Ah, poor fellow!" said he gravely. "Your case is quite beyond my skill, I'm afraid. I think you had better call in the parson."

Mirabel blushed vividly, but their badinage was over. Erne had fairly exhausted himself in his effort to keep up, but now a sudden fainting overtook him.

It was only the natural result of having overtaxed his strength, the doctor explained; and Valere, when revived again, was cautioned to remain very quiet, but he was not yet ready to drop the subject he had agitated.

Mr. Thancroft came in while the quiet consultation was in progress, and added his plea in favor of the young man's wishes.

"You are to marry sooner or later, Miss Durand. Let the little time be in favor of your mutual happiness."

So Mirabel, persuaded most by Erne's pleading glance, yielded to the general solicitation that they two—already one in heart—should be quietly married that same evening.

There was a little pleasant stir throughout the manse when the fact was made known.

Fay heard it with a gush of gratified astonishment. She proffered her assistance in dressing the bride-elect, but Mirabel preferred being left quite alone.

"But I'm so surprised; so overjoyed since I know you're quite reconciled. It does seem like such an unnecessary sacrifice on your part."

Mirabel's eyes flashed, but she said, quietly:

"I am fully satisfied with my choice."

"Oh, of course, Mr. Valere is perfectly splendid. But, dear Miss Durand, do you mean to make over all that money to me? I really can't think of permitting it. I can't think of accepting more than half the money and of the jewel caskets, you darling Mirabel."

And Mirabel, filled with grave, tender thoughts, could not but laugh at the finesse of the little intriguer.

"Not even the least of the Durand gems, Miss St. Orme," said she, decisively. "The money is freely yours, but the jewels are a part of the Durand estates."

And so with the pittance of thirty thousand dollars Fay was fain to be content. But even this little fortune was not sufficient to account for the radiant triumph which illumined her fair face when she shut herself alone in her chamber.

"Mine," she whispered, and she did not think of the money now. "He must be mine after this."

The evening hours came, and in the gloaming, with the red glare of sunset early superseded by mellowed lights from the chandeliers, Valere and Mirabel were made man and wife.

But before the ceremony had taken place, Miss Durand legally transferred her legacy of thirty thousand dollars to Fay St. Orme. She went to Erne, as she had said, a penniless bride; but dearer in her wealth of love and magnificence of charms of both person and mind, than if but one of these attractions had been represented by a princess's dower.

She had changed her mourning robes for a dress of sheer white, fleecy muslin; and as the evening closed in, Doctor Gaines sent her away for some warmer covering for her thin-clad shoulders.

She slipped her hand from the clasp of her husband, and with a lingering, downward glance at him, eloquent of love and trust, left the room.

The minutes slipped by; half an hour, an hour passed. The little group in the room of her husband wondered that she came not. A messenger was sent for her, but the bride was not in her own room.

There was an interval of waiting in which every one chided himself with unfounded fears; then, thoroughly alarmed by her continued absence, they sought for her through house and grounds.

But Mirabel, the bride of an hour, had vanished mysteriously and completely as though she had been a myth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY.

NOT one of the household at the manse slept that night. The servants who were not engaged in the active search for the missing bride, grouped together, and whispered over the old traditions attaching to the unhappy fate of the Durands.

But never had such a casualty as this befallen one of the house.

Deaths there had been, sudden, appalling, but

never a bride spirited away in the first hours of her wedded joy; never a husband left desolate before the nuptial kiss had ceased to thrill upon his lips.

Johnston had been sitting in his accustomed place in the hall below; Jean was gossiping with another of the maids at the foot of the spiral staircase, at the very hour when Mirabel so strangely disappeared. Not one of them had seen her. The only other means of exit was the servants' stairway at the rear of the manse, but the door communicating with this was locked, and the key in the housekeeper's possession.

Yet every corner of the upper portion of the manse had been searched, every nook capable of concealing a mouse had been explored, but Mirabel was nowhere there.

The acute sense of his sudden affliction sent new strength into the wasted form of Erne Valere. He rose up from his sick bed, and tottered through the rooms, white as a ghost, thin, shadowy, unreal, but with that fevered uncertainty of the something weird and horrifying which must have befallen Mirabel, he felt neither weakness nor fatigue.

But daylight came without one straw having been found on which to base a hope.

Then the younger detective, who still remained at the Fairview House enlisted by his principal in the search for Heloise Vaughn, was called to this new work.

And by means of his observation, trained as he was to note the minutest points, it became evident that Mirabel had not returned to her chamber after she had left her husband's side.

He observed the swinging casement that opened upon the balcony, to which easy access could be obtained from the court below. A light ladder easily removed would account for the seemingly inexplicable disappearance.

He made a careful inspection of the premises, and so he passed through the little dim ante-room, stooped to secure a knot of snowy ribbon on the red-and-black squares of the paved floor.

"She wore it," said Erne, chokingly, extending his hand for the tiny tie which had fluttered at Mirabel's stately throat.

And the little white tie was all that was found to trace her presence beyond the door which had closed her out from her new-made husband and the group of friends, when she left them on the preceding evening. Valere held it as he stood in the chamber now devoted to his occupancy, the room which had been Madame Durand's during her life.

"My dear sir," said Dr. Gaines, who still remained at the manse, "you must take some rest now. You must not suffer a relapse. I know how impatience and anxiety are wearing upon you, and you must not let them wear you out."

Erne shook his head sadly.

"I shall never rest until this mystery is cleared away. Don't ask me to remain quiet—inaction would madden me, but depend upon it I will not overtax my powers to endure."

Valere crossed the room to a little plain trunk, and took from it a quaint old casket of some dark-stained wood. The lid flew back at touch of a spring, exposing a lining of faded crimson silk, its only contents a lock of long, disheveled hair, rippling and bronze glistened. Valere glanced up to catch the doctor's eye upon him.

"This," said the young man, touching the bit of hair reverently, "is all that I ever knew of my mother. And this little knot of ribbon is all that is left me now of my wife; my beautiful, noble Mirabel. The two sacred keepsakes shall rest together."

He put the bit of ribbon tenderly down, and as he did so started violently at sound of the opening door. Every slight noise affected him, seeming to herald news of his lost love.

It was Mr. Thancroft who came in, with no glimmer of hope illumining his face. And that nervous action of Valere's had sent the open casket ringing to the floor.

It was shivered to fragments by the fall, and in the midst of the fragments lay a heap of something—lustrous white and violet and golden gleams.

Erne picked it up with an ejaculation of incredulous surprise—a chain of alternate amethysts and pearls, suspending a locket of medalion shape, with a monogram woven in continuous lines of crusted gems—a V of amethysts and a D of pearls.

"It is not possible—it cannot be the lost necklace—the necklace which of all the Durand jewels is the only missing piece!" cried Valere, in breathless amazement.

Mr. Thancroft pushed forward.

"It must be! Yes, certainly; that is the monogram."

He took the locket from Erne's nerveless hand, and fumbling it a moment, succeeded in finding the spring. It opened to disclose a painted miniature, the face of a man which Mr. Thancroft recognized from a portrait which hung in the gallery of the manse, but the face was younger, fresher, tinted with the very expression of life by the hand of a master artist.

"It is Mr. Valliers Durand," said the lawyer. "How strongly it reminds me of some one—is it you, Erne? I trace a resemblance, but it is indistinct when I look at you."

"Do you not see?" queried Valere, eagerly. "It is the very counterfeit of Lucian Ware!"

So it was! The regular, perfectly modeled features, the deep violet eyes, the bronze locks, the firm curve of the lip, which marred an otherwise faultless face with the cruel hardness lurking there—all these were reproduced again in Lucian Ware!

"It must be only a chance likeness—a mere coincidence," said Mr. Thancroft, hurriedly. "Do not mention this discovery, either of you; but tell me, Valere, where did you get possession of this old casket?"

Valere rehearsed that scene from his childhood, which had come back to impress itself in such startling outlines upon his memory. He pictured the old casket in his baby hands, the little gold-tubed vial which lay within it, the woman who had watched him quietly at first, and then had snatched the vial away with an inarticulate savage cry.

"The woman—who was the woman?" demanded the lawyer.

"I do not know. I can see her now when I close my eyes and concentrate my mind to the task of remembering; a tall woman with a harsh face, and a great mass of gold-bright hair, just touched with gray. I would know her should I ever see her again, but I cannot remember the name."

"Was it Vaughn?"

"Vaughn?—no! What was it?—if I could but think."

He knit his brows in a strong effort to remember.

"I have a shadowy impression—don't speak! It is coming to me, I think. Helen?—no! Hermoine?—Heloise—that is it, Heloise!"

"Heloise Vaughn!" cried the lawyer.

Valere looked surprised, and the other hastened to explain.

"The very woman whom Drake is searching for now; the woman who had charge of Jules Durand's child."

"What a strange complication," said Valere, thoughtfully. "The little vial which I saw first so many years ago, I would be willing to take oath is the one which was found in the possession of Milly Ross, and I thought I saw it on the night of madame's death in the hands of Miss St. Orme."

He had no hesitation in making known the fact now, since it had been proved that the poison which the vial contained had not been administered to Madame Durand.

"I can't make head or tail of the affair as it stands," said the lawyer in utter perplexity. "It's a bad tangle to unravel, but we'll do it yet."

And in pursuance of the task, he went straight to the presence of Miss St. Orme and questioned her closely.

But Fay, before this released from the fear that any suspicion should be cast upon her, disclaimed all knowledge of the vial other than was known to the rest.

Valere had been mistaken, she said. It must have been the gleam of her bracelet he had seen—the bracelet madame had given her. She had worn it that night.

It proved useless, too, to press the question upon Ross. She clung to the course she had steadily pursued throughout, by refusing to throw any light upon her possession of the vial.

The appearance of Drake on the following day promised something definite at last. He had actual trace of Heloise Vaughn now. She had been flitting from one to another of the little villages of the mountain, and at Lyle Ridge had been overtaken by a sudden severe illness, the result of exposure and fatigue. He had taken such precautionary measures as would prevent her eluding them again.

And still Mirabel was not found. Her fate was shrouded in the same inexplicable mystery, unpierced by a single ray of light.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LIFE OR DEATH?

THREE days went by and the morning of another broke, cloudless, calm and dazzlingly bright. A day, portentous in the duty it heralded, fraught with interest still and intense to all Fairview; opening with uncertainty and suspense, to close with the boon of liberty or sentence of condemnation—which? The day of trial for Milly Ross.

The county court-room was crowded to suffocation on that sweltering early autumn day. Local curiosity had risen to fever heat. The wide-spread reputation of dead Madame Durand, the respect which her immense possessions commanded far and near, the mystery of the fatal drug which had worked her end, and the subtle fascination which the details of any crime seem always to exert, drew the eager, unsympathizing, breathless crowd.

The inmates of the manse were there in their capacity of witnesses. Even the terrible strain of anxiety which bore upon Erne regarding the uncertainty of Mirabel's fate was crowded back during the hours he was called to participate in the scene of the trial.

Not a single hopeful face greeted the advent of the prisoner. A few, notwithstanding the

general opinion, believing her guiltless, despite the dark appearances, wore sad expressions. But the one who had worked for her faithfully from the first, the one who had cheered her when she found no other comfort, was missing now at the last. North was not there.

The evidence was substantially that which had been taken at the inquest. There was scarcely a doubt through all the vast assembly what the result would be. The case was carried on through the whole day, and at sunset the jury—after the briefest absence from the court—returned to the box.

"Gentlemen of the jury," spoke the judge, "what is your verdict? Do you find the prisoner guilty?"

"GUILTY, your honor; and we recommend punishment to the full extent of the law."

The dejected, shrinking form of the prisoner drooped yet more, and a low moan of despairing horror broke over her lips.

A stillness, like the stillness of death itself, fell on the waiting assembly. The judge rose up in his place to pronounce the sentence.

But before a word could be uttered came the sound of horses' hoofs, and the roll of a vehicle, coming at a fearful pace along the beaten road. A cloud of dust, a crash as the vehicle was brought to a sudden stand-still, and the jaded, hard-driven beasts backed and plunged as they felt the cruel curb; but, never heeding them, a man sprung out and rushed, like one mad, into the court-room.

"Stop, for the love of Heaven!" he gasped, pushing his way frantically forward to the side of the counsel for the defense, and breathlessly panting a few words into his ear.

The lawyer rose up and addressed the astonished judge.

"Your honor, there is further evidence to be taken. The verdict must be reconsidered after these new proofs have been presented."

After some little demur, the case was carried over to the morrow; and on the earliest train came the professor who had been instrumental in tracing the cause of madame's death.

The excitement on the second day was intense.

After a few opening remarks by the counsel, the professor was called to the stand, and his testimony cleared the point at last—the mystery of the subtle poison which had stolen madame's life.

After all, it was no human hand which had dispensed the deadly essence, but the quaint old ring of amethysts and pearls.

The pearls were no pearls, but accurate imitations, and contained a large percentage of that subtle mineral poison, the agency of which had effected the fatal end. The crystals which the professor had discovered in the china basin were now accounted for. The strong ingredients which composed the liniment had acted as a dissolvent of the false pearls, and had also precipitated the effect of the poison upon the madame. Otherwise, she would have wasted away gradually, and seemingly died of a decline.

We pass over the details of the trial, and at its close find Ross—weak, indeed, but never criminal—triumphantly vindicated.

A new verdict was rendered, and this time the foreman's stentorian tones rung through the breathless, waiting people:

"NOT GUILTY!"

Cheer after cheer broke from hundreds of throats; and North, whose indefatigable researches had brought about this result, sprung forward just in season to receive the fainting form of Ross as she tottered from her chair.

Poor, humbled Milly Ross! She could find no words to thank her preserver when she recovered from the giddy unconsciousness which followed the release she had well-nigh ceased to hope for.

She could only cover her pallid, worn face with her thin little hands, and sob in gratitude and contrition; for, during the weeks of her imprisonment, while the clerk engaged his utmost efforts of diligence and purse and mind in her cause, Lucian Ware had never once visited her cell, nor acknowledged her sacrifice and forbearance by so much as a word or token. Blind, indeed, must she have been to remain ignorant now as to which might be her truest love.

"Don't cry so, Milly," exclaimed North, in distress, unconscious that tears were wetting his own honest cheeks. "Don't think that I'll trouble you, either, now that you're free; I love you too well to urge you to any promise against your will, my lass!"

"Oh, Henry, Henry North!" cried the maid, struggling to check her sobs. "I've not merited such love from you; but, if it's true that you care for me yet, I'll never say to you no again."

"Milly, lass! I've not even the hope of the little martin-box to offer you now."

Ross looked up, to read the explanation in his averted gaze and reddening countenance.

"You've spent it all in clearing me," said she, quickly. "I'm all too thankful to be spared for work, and to help you win it back again. I'll be faithful to you for all my life after this, Henry."

And that assurance was more precious to the

humble, struggling clerk than would have been a mint of gold.

That there was still something on his mind was evident, but he soon unburdened himself fully.

"I hadn't enough, lass, to put me through without breaking on the sum the madame left. I've saved you three hundred of it though, and I'll pay you back the rest—every cent of it. The legacy was meant for you, Milly, and yours. It shall be."

In vain did Milly plead; North remained firm as a rock.

"We'll join our fortunes some day, please the Lord," said he, "when I get enough scraped ahead again. But madame's legacy must always be yours for a reserve, or whatever else you may like."

Fay St. Orme paused on the first landing of the spiral stairway. She had never quite overcome her awe of this place; she never made the descent without hesitating first, and grasping the balustrade firmly as she followed the course of the broad shallow steps.

As she stood there looking down into the black depths shudderingly, she fancied that cautious steps were treading the rounds near her; but glancing up no one was to be seen in the lighted space above. Again the indistinct steps sounded seemingly at her very side.

She glanced along the corridor at her back but no one was there. While she waited wondering, the door from the little anteroom swung ajar, and through the crevice she caught one glimpse of a face—the face of Lucian Ware. Almost instantly the door closed again without a sound.

Fay sprung forward to fling it back. The latch resisted her hand for a second, then the door opened to disclose the little room empty of any presence save now her own. She passed through hastily to the old madame's chamber—the one now occupied by Valere. It held no one.

Erne had gone this afternoon, in company with Mr. Thancroft, to Lyle Ridge.

Fay's first impression had been that Ware, not knowing his absence, had made his way unannounced to the other's chamber. She stood still trying to solve the puzzle.

She had seen Lucian unmistakably in the glow of the western light; and now, just as certainly, he was nowhere in these two rooms which had no door of exit except the one which opened upon the landing.

She was not generally acute in drawing deductions, but now a suspicion flashed through her brain with sudden bewildering force.

She went quietly out, and sped back through the corridor to her own room again. She snatched a voluminous, ash-colored cloak from her wardrobe and put it on hastily over her crape evening dress. She tied the broad brim of a gray leghorn hat under her chin that the shadow should conceal her features, and then stole noiselessly out without attracting the attention of any one within the manse.

Down the mountain path she sped and straight to the lodging of Ware. His door was shut, and no answer came to her repeated summons.

The heavy steps of his landlady shuffled through the passage below, and paused at the foot of the stairs which led to his apartments. She held a sputtering tallow candle in her hand, lighted newly, and by its inefficient rays tried to pierce the obscurity which by this time had gathered.

"Mr. Ware's not in yet," she called. "Ye can wait down here if ye like."

With that she receded into her own domain, leaving the candle sputtering from a tin socket pinned against the wall, and throwing a flickering glare over a couple of rickety chairs ranged in the passageway.

"I'll not wait," Fay said to herself, with a quick compression of her lips not quite pleasant to see. It suggested the malice which a nature like hers will sometimes entertain.

But in the door she met Lucian, and paused. "I've been calling on you, Mr. Ware; the 'not at home' I received was not purely conventional, I find."

"I was late leaving the office," said Ware, by way of explanation.

"Dew on his boots," was Fay's quick mental observation. "He never got that on the village pavement."

"I had a letter from mamma to-day," she continued aloud in sweetest accents. "I want to consult you, Lucian, that is if you will walk with me to the end of the street. I'll not take you further this time, I promise."

He stepped out to the walk by her side.

"Now, what do you suppose this precious mamma of mine has been about?" pursued Fay, in her honeyed tones. "Just think! she has actually 'went and gone and done it,' which is the little boys' version of some tiresome Latin proverb or other. She has married again without ever consulting me, the sole chick of her care."

"Ah!" said Ware, with languid interest.

"Yes, married!" reassured Fay, "to an unpronounceable German name, and hundreds of thousands of thalers to such an amount that my

mathematical ignorance couldn't grasp it. "Mamma had just got news of the madame's death and my disappointment, and writes for me to join her in Baden-Baden whenever I am so inclined."

"You'll go?" queried Ware.

"I've not decided quite," replied Fay slowly, inwardly raging at his evident unconcern. "The truth is, there's no very extraordinary affection existing between mamma and me. You see, I was always regarded as an extra expense on her hands. I had to be clothed and educated, of course, and the allowance uncle St. Orme made her was really insufficient for all our needs."

"Then, I was just her style, and being twenty years younger always made her appear faded beside me—although I believe she was remarkably well preserved."

"It was purely to get me out of her way that mamma sent me here to this dull Fairview; and I don't suppose she'll be any more anxious for my rivalry in that charming Baden, where ladies need not necessarily be free from matrimony to assert their privilege of flirting. I've no idea that sweet *ma mere* is at all in love with her old money-bags of a German husband."

"You might entangle a count or a duke, or something of that kind, you know," suggested Ware, so indifferently that Fay's heart and her hopes sunk together like weights of cold lead.

She caught her tongue between her glistening little teeth before she would trust herself to speak.

"Perhaps I might," she said, in a slow, modulated tone of meditation. "That's an enticing aspect of the case, I admit. Ah, here we are! Good-night, Mr. Ware."

He lingered to ask with assumed indifference:

"Is there still no trace found of Miss Durand?"

"Of Mrs. Valere? They're searching closely, but secretly too, so I can't positively say."

"Are you sure that you know nothing of her whereabouts, Mr. Lucian Ware?"

She put the question with startling distinctness, yet with such an air of pretty innocence and candor, that Ware studied her face doubtfully through the obscurity of the twilight before he responded.

"I!—how should I know any thing of her?"

Fay flew up the rugged pathway when he had left her, breathless, wrenching her delicate hands in convulsive clasps, panting out disconnected ejaculations of anger, disappointment and malice.

"Ah, to think he could deceive me! He knows—it is surely his work. Lucian, oh, my love! Peste!—you should have known better than to scorn such love. Oh, but you shall suffer a thousand pangs for every one you've sent home to me. My love-passion ran riot for a time, but the flame began to flicker, and now you have quenched it out very completely indeed."

"The clew?—ah, yes! It is quite enough to put them on the track. Oh, Lucian, Lucian!"

Valere had accompanied Mr. Thancroft to Lyle Ridge, at the urgent request of the latter. There seemed nothing to be gained by remaining at the manse, and he cherished a vague hope that the woman, Heloise Vaughn, through her knowledge of the Durand history, might throw some light upon the mystery of Mirabel's disappearance.

Drake had gone before by another way. They were within a mile of the village of Lyle Ridge, when the detective, mounted for his return, met them with a crestfallen look.

"The bird's flown!" said he, doggedly. "She's given us the slip again, and I—well, I acknowledge myself the cussedest fool in all Christendom."

CHAPTER XXV.

THROUGH TRIBULATIONS—PEACE!

MEANTIME, where was Mirabel?

She had slipped her hand from the loving clasp of her husband, with her dark eyes beaming full of the light of radiant, perfect joy and trust; had moved away, a stately, incomparable being in his raptured sight.

The anteroom was dimly lighted through a single ground glass globe affixed to the swinging chandelier. Scarcely had the door closed between her and the room she had left when a cloud of suffocating blackness descended upon her, through which was perceptible the sweet, sickish odor of chloroform.

She was torn from her feet and crushed through an aperture, something slid into place behind her, and she felt herself borne downward through a space so narrow that her dress of white, crisp muslin swept the walls on either side.

So sudden had been the attack, so irresistible the force which had borne her away—as the bursting tempest will carry a defenseless drift before it—that she could offer no resistance. And in a moment that sweet, sickish essence had accomplished its mission, and she lay a helpless weight in her captor's arms.

When consciousness came back, she found herself in a small room, imperfectly lighted by

a single taper burning low in its socket. She was resting on a straw mattress flung upon the bare floor, and a dark cloak which yet exhaled a faint odor of chloroform, was crushed in a heap at a little distance.

By her side some one was kneeling, covering her hands with impassioned kisses, and murmuring her name in fond, triumphant accents.

"Mirabel, oh! peerless Mirabel!"

With a shudder she wrenched her hands away, and raised herself to a sitting posture, not able to comprehend for a moment what had befallen her or how she had come there.

"Lucian Ware!" she murmured, in bewilderment, as she traced his features by the dim light. "How did you come here? Where is Erne?"

The face of the man beside her was cruel in its mocking triumph.

"Ah, sweet! We are here together. What does it matter for all the rest of the world? You are mine, fair Mirabel, beyond power of any one snatching you away. Mine for time, or mine for eternity—for we shall either live for each other, or die together."

"Are you mad?" cried Mirabel, thrilling with fear as she saw the frenzy of passion which convulsed his face. "What is this place to which you have brought me? Oh, Lucian Ware, what rash act was this? Do you not know that my friends—that my husband—will never rest until I am found, and you punished? Take me back, I beseech you."

His laughter was a shrill scream which rung and echoed in the room. Such discordant mirth, and such triumphant flames as danced in his paling eyes!

She shrunk away from him, but her eyes were fixed with a fascinated gaze upon his pallid, mocking face.

"Lovely Mirabel! It would be little wonder if I were truly mad with the joy of this moment. Poor, snared bird, why should you tremble so? No greater madness than love for you can ever thrill through my veins or quicken my heart-throbs."

"See how calm I am, and listen while I tell you how hopelessly you are in my power—how utterly you are mine."

"Do you remember the tale which the madame rehearsed that first night you were at the manse—the story of fair, false Rosalie Durand and her hapless lover? He was never seen after he left the tower, according to the madame's tale. But tradition has sent down another version of the fate which befell him."

"Tradition whispers that the workmen brought from over the seas and sent back to their foreign homes again when the task was completed, built a secret chamber, closed in around by the vaults beneath the tower. There was an underground passage, and a secret stairway leading from it up to every floor of the manse. They say, that when M. Valliers Durand returned to discover his rival in company with frail Madame Rosalie, the secret chamber found an occupant who died here from starvation."

"I have brought you, sweet Mirabel, by the way of the secret stair and the underground passage to the secret room, closed in about by the charnel vaults beneath the tower. The manse has been rebuilt in part, but the secret stair which is only a shell around the central spiral way, and the sliding panel which opens into the little anteroom, have never been disturbed."

"Not one of your friends dreams of the existence of this secret room. The loudest screams you can utter will fail to penetrate these solid walls. You are mine, Mirabel, and no power on earth can snatch you from me."

She listened breathlessly, never losing a word.

When he was done she faced him, scorn blazing in her dusky eyes, determination stamped on every lineament of her still, white face.

"You have done bravely to entomb a defenseless woman," said she, with contempt for him ringing in her tones. "You would be a worthy descendant of that same M. Valliers Durand of whom tradition treats."

"How dare you offer me such insult—how dare you proffer your love to me, a wedded wife! Only my husband, brave and true, commands my heart. Yours I am not—never will be—though this prison chamber proves my grave."

"Hunger and thirst are powerful agents to quell a haughty spirit," said Ware grimly.

"I offer you love, sweet Mirabel, devotion, idolatry. Scorn me, and I will be your master; I will compel you to submission. That haughty pride of yours shall be bowed to the very earth."

"Mirabel, my queen! don't drive me to using harsh measures with you. Consent to leave all and go with me, Mirabel. Oh, love! look into my eyes and see how my heart and soul are yearning for you. Oh, sweet, be kind!"

Mirabel drew herself away, queen-like in her wrath and scorn.

"It would be useless to plead to a craven nature like yours," said she. "I do not fear you for love is all-powerful. Oh, Lucian Ware! retribution will surely be meted out to you for

all your dastardly acts. It was you who dealt that cowardly blow upon my unsuspecting lover; you have torn me from him in the first hour of our wedded joy; but I know he will never rest night or day until I am found, and you are fitly punished."

Dark and threatening grew the face of the man she confronted. He bit his pallid lips to command his voice, which was hoarse with suppressed passion.

"We shall see if time and privations may not alter your views, madame. Neither food nor drink shall pass those lovely lips, until they willingly respond to mine in love's caresses. Those flashing black eyes shall not look upon the light of day until they meet mine with gentle, imploring glance. That stately form shall waste away in its concealed prison until it is glad to be fettered by the clasp of my arms."

"Yes, proud Mirabel! It shall be you who will sue before many days have passed."

She turned away from him with a gesture of repugnance, and Ware, after a moment's hesitation, took the remnant of taper from the sconce.

"Farewell, for the time, beautiful Mirabel. I shall hope for a warm reception when I come again."

She made no reply, and he passed out through a low door, artfully concealed in the seemingly blank wall, leaving her alone in utter darkness.

Strive as she might to be brave and patient, a thousand horrors would flock to assail her. Oh, it was terrible to be shut up there alone, surrounded by the vaults of the dead, shut off from all human intercourse except when her captor appeared to torment her.

She searched the walls of her prison with the touch of her delicate hands. Rough walls that oozed with an exhalation of slimy damp which spoke of the subterranean situation. But everywhere the surface seemed unbroken; she could find neither door nor aperture of any kind.

The air was musty, chill and close, but there was ventilation above as she found by stretching her hands far over her head where an almost imperceptible draught was stirring.

The hours wore on without bringing a gleam of light into the thick darkness of the place.

Oh, dreary, dragging hours!

Oh, faithful heart above that is tortured by unknown fears, while the search goes vainly on!

Oh, breaking heart below that has lost all hope at last. Poor wasting frame, weak from famine, burning in every vein with the fever of unappeased thirst.

Oh, cruel heart that is wrung by her sufferings, but will not yield—will not even waver from its stern resolve.

Four days that are like an eternity of darkness, broken thrice by brief visits from her cruel captor, and not one morsel of food nor drop of cooling water has passed her lips.

She lies upon the straw mattress, with a continuous moan for "water! water! water!" gurgling in a gasping way from her parching throat.

Oh, for the dew in Heaven to fall with blessed moisture on her burning brow. Oh, for the drops of a summer rain to plash on the lips that shriveled and cracked with the raging thirst.

That consuming thirst is the only agony her failing senses can now understand.

She does not heed the approaching step, the opening door, the flash of sudden light. No motion and no sound from her except that continuous babble for "water! water!"

Ware stoops over her in affright. A shadow of remorseful fear sweeps like a black cloud over his face, and he speeds away in quest of the water she craves.

He is back soon, and he moistens the longing lips, the drops trickle one by one down the scorching throat.

The agony is over, and blessed relief has come.

Her closed lips tremble, and then are still in blessed slumber. Her hands trail in the vessel of water he has placed by her side, and she smiles in the sweet dreams that visit her.

Then with a sigh that is almost a sob, Ware bounds to his feet and hurries away.

To save her he knows that he has run the risk of discovery. To obtain the water he has been to the inhabited part of the manse, and he has been seen—as we know.

It is night again. Star-gemmed midnight without—the same impenetrable blackness which never changes night or day in that underground prison—never except when the stream of artificial light announces Ware's coming.

Mirabel is awake, but haunted by mystic dreams. She fancies that she is hearing improbable sounds—footfalls in the space around and above her, spirit voices shrieking her name through echoing voids.

She has been like one in a trance since the pain and the agony left her. So weak, that to lie there motionless is a luxury; so lost to thought that nothing troubles her.

Ware has been there once, and given her some light, refreshing broth, which she swallowed with infinite relish. The door swings back and he comes again, with bright hair massed in disheveled locks, his eyes bloodshot and gleaming with their opal passion-lights.

The door sways, and remains ajar. He dashes down his burning candle-end and springing forward clasps her in his arms. But through the vaults comes an echoing shout, he sees a glimmer of light through the crevice of the swinging door.

He clangs it shut, and lays her gently down again. Resolve, like a glow of inspiration, sweeps over his pallid face.

He snatches the light again, and kneeling, with his bare hand tears up a fragment of the floor. He touches the flame to the orifice he has made, and when he recedes a red eye gleams there.

Mirabel watches him with a languid curiosity which does not comprehend his motive. He comes close to her, his face aglow with desperate enthusiasm.

"My love, my bride in death! I swore you should never be taken from me, and we will die now together."

As he stoops to enfold her in his arms, she shivers and puts up her thin hands, waving him back.

"What's that?" she asks, in an awe-stricken whisper, watching that lurid glow within the floor. "Who is calling me? Erne—husband!"

She tried to rise, but Ware held her back.

"What's that? Your death-warrant and mine," he answers, with impressive calmness. "There's a trench under there filled with powder, and that is a slow match you see burning. You scorned my love, sweet Mirabel, but mine you are at last."

An incubus of horror weighs upon Mirabel. She would scream out, but her powers of speech seem paralyzed. Breathless, fascinated, motionless, she watches that sullen coal sink lower in the floor.

"Only two minutes to live," breathes Ware at her ear.

Slowly, slowly, sinks the spark of fire. Suddenly it goes out in utter darkness. Ware moves uneasily.

"Has it ceased to burn?" he mutters, and springing over the little space, stoops to revive the vanished spark.

In the same instant a voice calls, loudly:

"Mirabel! Mirabel!"

It wakes her from the spell which has enthralled her—it sends her sudden strength. With a wild cry, she darts into the further corner of the room.

There is a hissing sound, a flash, a burst like all the thunder of heaven gathered into one peal.

Walls are riven in twain! They totter—they fall. The earth rocks. Coffins in the charnel vaults start from their niches. Some are shattered, and ghastly skeletons start forth.

Those who have penetrated the secret passage, and are searching the vaults, fall upon their knees, powerless from affright.

Only one springs forward, when forth from the riven wall creeps a white-clad figure, with a wan, emaciated face, which lights with ineffable joy as his arms open to receive her.

She nestles close to the manly breast, where the true heart beats within. Never more shall ills of life assail with that brave heart to be her shield.

Let the curtain drop over such a holy scene, then ring it up again to witness the end and hear the explanations.

When the disappointed party returned from their fruitless expedition to Lyle Ridge, Fay put into their possession the clew which unraveled the mystery of Mirabel's sudden disappearance.

The anteroom was subjected to minutest examination until the sliding panel was discovered. With the secret stair and the passage beneath revealed, the mystery was cleared away.

Ware, becoming cognizant of this discovery, hastened to effect the tragic end he had prepared should his plans fail.

Miraculous, indeed, was Mirabel's escape.

Ware was unearched from the ruins, his body crushed to a shapeless mass, his face fair, serene and perfect in death.

As they laid him down upon the earth, under the glare of the torches, a fitting, silent figure came in from the passageway. The woman whom we have seen before, whom the reader has before now rightly conjectured to be Heloise Vaughn.

Valere, seeing her face, convulsed and grief-stricken as it was, recognized her.

"Heloise!"

She stood above the prostrate, silent form, wringing her hands in mute anguish, then gazed around upon the waiting group.

"He is dead—he has suffered the Fate of the Durands. He has been sacrificed for an atonement. The prophecy is fulfilled, and the curse stops with him."

Her voice was intensely calm and clear as she turned her face upon Valere, who stood a little aside, still clasping his rescued bride.

"You have nothing to fear," she said. "I felt the Fate, and I prayed that it might descend upon you, but it has fallen on him instead. He was your twin brother—you were the twin sons of Jules Durand."

Startling revelation to those who listened. Valere uttered a cry, and Mr. Thancroft started

forward, but, with a gesture, the woman commanded silence. She continued, steadily:

"When the twin boys were born, their mother went nearly wild with grief, knowing the Fate which the prophecy foretold for one of them. I was her aunt, and a Valliers, though she never knew it—she thought I came of her mother's family."

"You all know of the feud which existed between those of our house and the Durands. I shared it, though the baby-wife had won me over to favor her husband, who was one of them."

"But the old madame I hated, and I saw here a chance to strike that overweening pride of hers a deadly blow."

"I persuaded Jules's wife to conceal the birth of one of the children, and I put it out to nurse with a woman who passed it for her own. That one you knew as Lucian Ware."

"After his mother's death, madame paid me for the care of the other, and in our bargain I stipulated that she should interest herself in the welfare of the little son of my niece, as I openly recognized Lucian to be. Madame never suspected that my niece had been the wife of her son, instead of the woman Ware, who died near the same time."

"The one I had in charge I called by the name of his grandfather, who was Erne Valliers until the name was changed to Valliers Durand when he married the madame. The ignorant people of the village called it wrong, and I never set them right, so the name came to be Valere."

"He was like the Durands, and I hated him for the resemblance. Once when he found the little vial of poison, I stood there, thinking how glad I should be if he would die; but, when I saw the stopper loosen in the tube, I snatched it away, for he was of our blood, too, and I dared not let him bring the Fate upon himself."

"When they were old enough to be put to school, madame sent both the boys away; and when they arrived at manhood she brought Valere here to the manse as you know, while Lucian was put with Thancroft."

"He had grown up like us Valliers, and I was both proud and fond of him. I never let him suspect his identity, but I nourished the ambition which would make him a princely master of all Fairview some day. I waited, hoping the Fate might fall upon the other one, and meaning then to produce Lucian as the rightful heir."

"But madame died and her will baffled my intentions. She was too vindictively proud to openly acknowledge the youth whom she believed to be Jules Durand's only son—but she was never so bitter as she professed, and made her will to secure the estates to her lawful heir."

"I knew how you were searching for me since, but I kept out of your way, for I meant that at last Lucian should have it all. I was waiting—waiting always for the Fate to seize its victim, and be appeased forever."

"I knew of the secret passage, and I have remained in the secret room sometimes for days together. Lucian often met me here, but of late he warned me to keep away. Alas, alas! I knew not the fatal plans he had in view."

"It is all over and I am desolate. Ah, misere, misere!"

Thus all the mystery was cleared away at last.

Lucian was laid to rest in the vault of the Durands.

Heloise Vaughn could not be persuaded to remain at the manse after the funeral was over, and not long after she was found dead at the foot of one of the mountain fastnesses.

Fay St. Orme took her portion of thirty-thousand dollars, and straightway sailed for Europe. Whether or no she accomplished her ambitious intent of wedding an earl, remains yet to be seen.

The little martin-box in the village was deeded to Milly Ross at Mirabel's request, so North had not long to wait for the pale little wife who learned to appreciate his noble worth by such a bitter lesson. Their prospects seem dazzling to them, since North has lately come to be sole agent of the great Durand estate.

Doctor Gaines and his maiden sister are proud to be on intimate terms with the great people at the manse; and Mr. Thancroft is satisfied now that the son of Jules Durand has regained his ancestral rights.

Erne Valere is known now as Valliers Durand.

The fatal ring of amethysts and pearls has been destroyed, but right regally does Mirabel wear the Durand diamonds, and the manse has never known a fairer or statelier mistress.

But more precious than priceless gems is the love these two bear each other.

THE END.

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